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LADY LAURA

VOL. III.

LADY LAURA

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

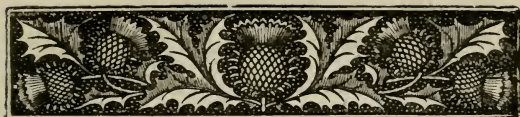
VOL. III.



STRAHAN AND COMPANY LIMITED

34, PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON

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CHAPTER I.

‘Conviction was not, courage failed, and truth
Was something to be doubted of.’

IT was the middle of April. East winds and south-west breezes, hail, rain, and sunshine, took the hours in turn. Out in the country, orchards were white with blossom, woods were powdered with faint green, and daffodils were blazing in the fields. In London, painters’ ladders cumbered the pavement, shops were either idly shuttered or bursting into splendour of spring finery, Rotten Row was empty, and the show of carriages was shabby in the ring. The small big world had fled from town

to spend the Easter holidays among buds and blossoms, and the great little world was swarming in the dusty streets and shadeless parks, in practical contradiction of the announcement of the *Morning Post* that London was a desert.

Lady Laura Herne did not read the *Morning Post*, but in this particular she agreed with it, notwithstanding that from the drawing-room window of a small house overlooking Regent's Park she was watching the crowds of holiday-makers who were amusing themselves unfashionably in the open sunshine. She felt no sympathy with their enjoyment: it was loud and coarse, and jarred upon her taste. She looked on at it only because she was disinclined for any other occupation.

But in truth it was not solely because the enjoyment of the people was coarse that she felt out of tune with it:

enjoyment of itself was an affront to her. The very brightness of the sunshine offended her mood, and the scents of violets and primroses, that came in whiffs from the baskets of flower-hawkers in the street, only awakened a painful longing to get away and bury herself in some grassy nook at Ardgwen, and dream herself back into her old life. Tears came into her eyes as she looked across the terrace and between the opposite houses into the green distance of feathery willows and slower-budding elms,—tears which came often now, and were the more difficult to repress that they sprang from no definite cause, but were only the expression of a vague weariness and disappointment.

More than a year has passed since we last saw Laura, and the year has been a momentous one for her. We left her on the threshold, and we find her

again in the inner chamber of life. In the meanwhile she has been learning many lessons that she did not look for; and though they are very common ones, as might be shown by a comparison of experience with many of the very people in the street whose appearance is so unsympathetic to her, they seem to her so exceptional as to insulate her life. Her marriage has disappointed her, and she is in despair for herself and all the world.

But let us go back over the time. Lord Rhooos carried through successfully the work of smoothing her love-path. He fought her battle with Lady Mary and Lady Walworth, and made them both promise to withdraw their opposition. Mary was the hardest to persuade, but she gave her word solemnly in the end and kept it literally—treating Herne icily whenever they met, and speaking

of the marriage—when speech was necessary—as a thing ordained and inevitable. Rachel, on the other hand, treated the affair as an amusing joke—especially amusing in view of Rhoo's attitude towards it; she promised lightly, and having promised, began immediately to speculate on the probabilities of Laura's proving inconstant.

‘ You don't expect me to force them to marry in spite of themselves ? ’ she asked.

Rhoo said not.

‘ Nor to send Laura down to Ardgwen at the first symptom of wavering ? ’

That was not insisted on either.

‘ Nor to warn off every man who is not a bore ? It will not be dishonourable, I suppose, to let her see that there are a few other men in the world.’

Rhoo thought not. And Lady Walworth renewed her promise, privately

satisfied that she would not have to keep it long.

But Rhoos had a cordial ally in Lady Sarah. She kept him constantly informed as to the development of affairs, and once sent him a strong hint that Rachel was playing false. Upon which he made an unexpected appearance in Arlington Street and found that his sister was working hard to get Laura engaged to her last new lion, a certain Mr. Grantley Graham, a young man of considerable fortune, who had lately been returned to Parliament by a Scotch constituency and was creating some excitement in the House of Commons by trenchant speeches against political abuses, and some trepidation in staid drawing-rooms by what Lady Walworth euphuistically called his bold handling of social questions. He avowed himself the apostle of pure hedonism; and as Lady

Walworth had adopted a Greek style of dress that season, and, with it, a leaning towards Greek conceptions of life, he was in great favour with her. She had been Mediæval the year before, and would as likely as not be Chinese before the next season came round. She had opinions as she had clothes, because it was impossible to appear in society without them; but she liked variety in all things, and shifted her mind's wardrobe as often as her body's. In justice to her, it must be said that neither had any very direct relation to her conduct. That was regulated by impulse alone, and kept within safe bounds by the very variety of her whims. It was pleasant to talk pure hedonism with Mr. Graham, but to practise it was neither more nor less to be thought of than to fast and scourge oneself because one wore a crucifix.

Laura also found it pleasant to talk to

Mr. Grantley Graham, and Lady Walworth certainly deserved some credit for the self-denial with which she left them to one another while she devoted herself to people too behindhand to appreciate pure hedonism. He was dining in Arlington Street on the evening of Lord Rhoos's arrival, and Rachel was conscious of a triumph when after sitting together through dinner he and Laura got into *tête-à-tête* again in the drawing-room. She suspected that her brother had come as a spy, and was impatient to have it out with him.

But Rhoos had weapons. He knew Grantley Graham,—a man of execrable opinions, which he was most honourably consistent in carrying out. This was said with a peculiar emphasis that made Lady Walworth suddenly realise what pure hedonism honourably carried out might lead to, and she wished the *tête-*

à-tête in the back drawing-room could be interrupted. She looked anxiously at the pair, and wondered whether Rhooos had noticed their mutual absorption. Rhooos however seemed to see nothing. He went on talking about Mr. Graham, and, though he mentioned several rather questionable episodes in his career which had not yet come to Rachel's ears, he laid no stress on them, but merely told them as relevant anecdotes likely to interest her.

Rachel grew alarmed and suddenly showed her hand.

‘What was she to do? He and Laura were devoted to one another. He might propose any day—was perhaps doing so now. And it would never do to let her marry a man like that.’ She was ready for desperate measures.

Rhooos shrugged his shoulders. ‘If Laura likes that kind of thing . . . ?’

‘Likes it! My dear Rhoos, what can she possibly know of such things? Can’t you go and interrupt them? It would look marked if *I* did, but *you*—— they will not suspect you.’

‘Graham will probably not propose while I am here.’

‘And you will speak to Laura to-morrow and tell her the sort of man he is?’

‘It will be better for *you* to do that,’ said Rhoos drily.

And in this way Rachel was brought to full confession.

It turned out that no mischief was done. Laura admitted to liking Mr. Graham and to enjoying his conversation. But on cross-examination it appeared that his charm lay chiefly in his knowing Herne and holding similar opinions to his on many subjects. Of pure hedonism he naturally had not talked to her.

Lady Walworth felt that she had had an escape, and she underwent a reaction of cordiality towards Herne. She had him frequently to dinner during the remainder of the season; and she was gradually dropping Mr. Graham, when one day he reinstated himself in her favour by announcing his engagement to a lady who fully shared his admiration of pure hedonism.

Rhoos had also taken much trouble to get some profitable advancement for Herne; and he had succeeded in obtaining for him the private secretaryship to the cabinet minister who was at the head of his office. This circumstance was felt to justify the reopening of the marriage question before the date originally fixed. And the result was that, very soon after Laura came home from her London season, Herne was authorised to go down to Ardgwen and renew his suit.

He came one day towards the end of August, when Laura was sitting under the old cedar-trees where they had first made friends that September morning. She was curled up in a little heap at the foot of one of the great trees with Cassandra's book in her lap and a queer medley of thoughts in her mind. She had been reading of devotion to humanity, of self-sacrifice that asks no reward, of brotherhood among men, of duty to the generations yet unborn. But somehow, in her thoughts, devotion to humanity became a synonym for loving Maurice, and the day when the kingdom of Heaven would come upon earth was identified with that which should make her his wife. Suddenly she heard a rustle among the leaves, and he stood before her, and she sprang to him, and felt that heaven had opened and life was turned into a strain of music.

Next day a gardener found the book under the trees and sent it up to the house. And Laura returned it to Cassandra with a great many thanks and an apology for the green stains that had come upon it during the night spent in the open. She wrote, 'You will not be angry when I tell you how it happened. I was reading your book yesterday under the trees when Maurice came, and I was so glad to see him that I forgot all about it and left it lying on the ground. I have tried to rub the stains out, but they will not move. I am so sorry. Thank you again, dear Cassie, for letting me keep the book so long. It has been a great comfort to me, and has made me understand things much more clearly than I did before.'

They were married in the beginning of September, and the early days of October found them settling into their

home—the small house with an outlook upon Regent's Park. The taking of that house had been Laura's first disappointment. For though it was unfashionably situated in comparison with the houses in which her sisters lived, it was a more expensive house than they could well afford, unless indeed they were to spend all their small income upon their own housekeeping, and leave no margin for the thousand and one little schemes of outside usefulness they had planned together. They had looked at a great many houses in less pleasant parts of London—houses in small dingy streets in central parts, semi-detached villas in suburban regions too remote to be named in Red Books, too near to be counted among the suburbs of pleasant refuge from London smoke and noise. But friends grew pathetic at the idea of Laura living in such places, and Lord St. Asaph shuddered at their

very names. And so the house by Regent's Park was taken to please Laura's family, and Laura was at first grateful to Maurice for giving in to her people, and afterwards blamed him in her heart for not having taken a more independent line. Everything else had been settled much in the same way. Laura was inexperienced and had the character of being unpractical. Her mother and sisters were the reverse, and naturally counted on her being guided by them in furnishing her house and engaging servants. They took her shopping, and hardly consulted her about what should be purchased. They told her how many servants she must keep and how much work each one must do, and they recommended some *protégée* of priceless value to fill each place. A kitchen-maid, much valued by the housekeeper at Ardgwen, was put through special training to

qualify her to cook in her own right for Herne and Laura; a girl who had been educated in Lady Sarah's schools was appointed to open their door and wait on them at meals; a housemaid, learned in hygiene and competent to light fires on scientific principles, was provided by Lady Mary; and a charwoman was introduced into the house by the cook before Laura took possession, and proved too firmly established as an every-other-daily visitor to be removed by any effort of hers, unless she were willing to let her cook go too,—a step that would have smacked of ingratitude towards her mother. Lady Walworth played the part of critic, and by her humorous comments upon one detail after another of the establishment, made it impossible for Laura to be blind to the absurdity of her position. She was the doll of the family, a creature without will, dignity, or authority. She

gave sham orders to servants who ruled her, handed out sums of money for expenses over which she had no control, was called mistress of a house in which no one was less free than herself. These things were clear to her in very early days of her married life, but they did not in the beginning gall her so much as they came to do by-and-by. When first they came to London the world was away, and Maurice came home early from his office, and had abundant leisure to spend with her. She was still child enough to enjoy the bustle of settling into the house, and since her husband assured her that submission to the benevolent despotism of her mother and sisters need be only temporary, she believed that the fulfilment of her dreams was only deferred. Things would change, and in a little time she and Maurice would quietly slip their chains

and do all the things they had talked of. And in the meanwhile she had more than enough to do in reading and learning all the things a useful woman ought to know. Herne initiated her by degrees into the philosophy of modern life, and told her how, long ago, he had begun a book of which the purpose was to bring home to the most simple and uneducated minds all such results of modern thought and discovery as bear directly upon daily life, and how he had laid it aside because his own life had proved unsatisfactory and he had shrunk from offering himself as a blind leader of the blind. Laura was eager to see the work, and he got out the long-neglected manuscript and read it to her during the evenings they spent together, and she wondered and admired and looked forward to the day when it should be given to the world and her husband should

be cleared of the imputation of having turned back from the plough.

But as the world came back to London, things changed. Herne's work was heavier, and he came home late from his office. Then invitations came thickly, and they were out almost every evening. Time, which had seemed infinite in the beginning, was now so short that from Sunday to Sunday Laura hardly had half-an-hour's real talk with her husband. He was always busy or tired. She had to go on alone with books they had begun together, and, if she referred to the plans they had made in the autumn, he seemed to have lost interest in them. The book was put away and never mentioned.

He had said that their present way of life was only temporary, but it seemed to Laura that they were settling into a groove which they would never get out

of again,—or rather into two grooves separate one from the other, his of office routine, hers of dollish uselessness. In every contact with him she seemed to find the echo of her own words when he was wooing her, ‘There is a gulf between us—I said there was a gulf.’

It was the irony of her lot that the gulf was another than that which she had dreaded. Cassandra’s prophecy had justified itself—she had not been long in learning to think with her husband in all things. It was he who had first roused her to think and feel beyond her personal life, and her sympathies had flowed easily into the channel of his own. She was like a finely capable instrument that chance had thrown under his hand to utter music of his choosing, or be silent if he forgot to touch the strings. But, being a human instrument, her silence could be only external.

Inwardly she was full of voices—the tunes he had taught her played themselves out in her heart, sadly and with wearisome mechanical repetitions. The ideas that had seemed pregnant with action a few months ago were now a meaningless habit of her mind. They could lead to nothing, they brought her no satisfaction, but she could not cast them out. They clung about her life importunately like persons with whom we have begun acquaintance on a warmer footing than we can maintain, and who, when we are cooling towards them, hang inconveniently upon us, not allowing us to follow the impulse of the altered mood that would disown them. She wished now that she had never heard of these fine-sounding humanitarian ideas that were so much too large for the practice of daily life, that she had never been asked to participate in plans that were not to be carried into action.

She might then have been happy in the round of shams that filled her day. She might have believed still, as she had once believed, that all work connected however distantly or mechanically with the political world was of patriotic quality, and that every man who went forth daily to his office and played his part in the great machine of government was an obscure hero indispensable to his country's good. But Herne had broken this illusion among many others. He had taught her to look at the British Constitution from the high ground of philosophical politics, to laugh with him at its anomalies, to feel the want of system in its basis, and to see in the confusion of its development the incurable anarchy that precedes dissolution. He had taught her in short to look upon the whole existing machinery of government as an entanglement of abuses which it was

only justifiable to bear with till the moment came for the substitution of a new order grounded on more systematic conceptions and born of a higher inspiration. It was therefore impossible for her to take much interest in his work, or to believe that it had any result of public benefit in the contemplation of which she might find compensation for her private loss; and it was inevitable that she should suffer in seeing him day by day grow more absorbed in it.

Then too he had shut up all ways of consolation. By looking through his eyes she had come to regard the life of her own class as selfish and frivolous, so that she could not content herself with the amusements of society. And the possibility of higher consolations was gone also. He had taken away her faith and given her nothing instead. She had staked all on him, and he had failed her.

Not that she exactly blamed him ; she could not do that yet, just as she could not yet have forgiven him had she looked his inconsistencies fully in the face. The man who had seemed to her girl's eyes the one hero in a world of faulty creatures must be kept at heroic height a little longer. So she blamed the general world and the ordering of it—blackening the background that her white spot grown grey might retain at least a relative radiance.

And all the while she concealed her disappointment so well that Herne believed her to be fully satisfied with her life, and when his fetters galled him as they too often did, he habitually justified himself for submitting to wear them by reflecting that they were the dowry she had brought him. Cassandra's warning came back to him not seldom. In such a marriage one or other must be sacri-

ficed. It seemed on the whole more chivalrous to let it be himself.

‘Marriage is the safeguard of the country,’ said an elderly gentleman one evening at a house where they were dinning. ‘If all marriages of young members of parliament and newspaper writers could be prohibited for a term of five years we should have a revolution before half the time was gone. I could name fifty men of my own acquaintance who, from being fire-brands, have become pillars of the state, and the talisman has been marriage in every case. There is nothing like it.’

Upon which had followed a general discussion, and everybody had adduced cases in support of the theory. Laura’s neighbour took the opportunity of thanking her for an article of Herne’s which had lately appeared in the *Present Day*, a colourless periodical that served as a

meeting-ground for writers of all parties in their relaxed moods, its contents being chiefly remarkable for that judicious quality of balance that gives the reader rest. Laura, who had not followed the conversation, did not at once see the point of the compliment. She brightened at praise of her husband's work, and said something incoherent about having had no part in it beyond that of an amanuensis.

‘No conscious part of course; you ladies always do your best work unconsciously,’ said her friend with bland paternal gallantry. ‘I may tell you in confidence that your influence is telling,—this article is its first fruit. You have taught your husband that we are not all ripe for knocking down. When a man passes from the *Reformer* to the *Present Day* we may consider him convalescent. Herne will be with us

altogether before long — fairly out of quarantine.'

Laura understood now, and could have cried with annoyance. Humiliation and mortification could hardly have been more exquisitely contrived: the world was thanking her for the results that made her miserable.

As Easter drew near she was buoyed up by the anticipation of a holiday visit to Ardgwen. The prospect was delightful to her in every way. She and Maurice would find one another again in the woods where they had found one another first. And her mother would help her. Not that she would tell her mother that she was disappointed, but somehow that expression in Lady St. Asaph's face, and the tremor in her voice that had perplexed her when she was confiding her love-story to her, came back to her often now as she mused upon her

trouble. They seemed sympathetic to it. Her mother would guess how it was with her and help her.

There was another face too that she wanted to see again. She was haunted by the likeness of her namesake that hung in the library at home. Whenever she looked in the glass, it seemed to her that the face of her ancestress looked out at her instead of her own reflection. And sometimes the impression was so strong as to make her wonder whether she was going mad and this was her first delusion. She was impatient to see the picture again, and note some of the points of difference between herself and it.

Altogether the longing for the visit grew intense, almost to frenzy. It was to end all her troubles and begin heaven again with better chances of continuance.

But she was to be disappointed in this

also. One morning at breakfast while she was counting the days till they could go, Herne told her that they must give up the visit. There were holiday duties to be done at his office, and the man on whom they would have fallen in the natural course of things was disabled by serious illness. For various reasons the work devolved upon him.

‘It is a bore,’ he said, ‘but it can’t be helped. And after all I don’t know that we shall lose much in the end. We can get away at Whitsuntide if we stay now, and the weather will probably be pleasanter then. Can you give me another cup of tea?’

He was holding out his cup to her. She must look up and smile, and take it, and make what apology she could for the foolish tears that she could not repress.

Of course he saw her tears and wanted

to know their cause. She stammered that they had none beyond that she was silly and not very well. Then why had she not told him that she was ill? He spoke in affectionate reproach, kissed her and stroked her hair, and insisted on being told exactly what was the matter.

She felt herself a humbug, and explained that she was not ill, only foolish, and finally attributed her tears to the disappointment about the visit to Ard-gwen,—which was in truth no more than their occasion. Of their cause she could not bring herself to speak, though her instinct told her now was her moment. Herne took her confession in good faith, and believed that she was crying childishly because her anticipated holiday was deferred. It was his turn to feel disappointed, and he did not conceal his annoyance. When he told her that

they would have to stay in London through the recess, it had been in his mind that the relinquishment of the holiday visit would restore to them a little of the privacy they had enjoyed so much before. He had thought Laura would see it in this light, he had counted on hearing her suggest that this would be compensation. He suggested it himself now, but in a tone of remonstrance that robbed the suggestion of comfort. Then he proposed that she should go alone since her heart was so much set upon it, and she felt that the tables were turned upon her. She must seem to him not silly only, but selfish, to be grieving over her own disappointments instead of throwing herself into his life. She would not hear of going alone—she did not mind about Ardgwen. She should like nothing so well as having a quiet time at home with him. She

could not think why she had been so silly as to cry

In short she was altogether ashamed of herself, and said so, and asked to be forgiven.

And so there was a little scene of forgiveness and reconciliation as if there had been a quarrel. And Herne went out to his office with a feeling of annoyance, and Laura sat at home and read her books and made heroic resolutions never to be foolish again.

On his way, Herne called on Lady Walworth, and told her that Laura seemed rather unwell and nervous, and asked her to look in on her in the course of the morning.

Rachel came, and found her sister looking brighter than usual.

‘Why, you are like Mother Hubbard’s dog,’ she said. ‘Maurice came and told me that you were ill, and that

I was to look in and prescribe. But you seem better than usual. What did he mean?’

Laura blushed uncomfortably, and felt her tears coming back at the reference to them.

‘I was silly at breakfast this morning, that was all. But it was good of Maurice to ask you to come. He *is* very good.’

‘Of course he is,’ said Rachel, and she repented of having disregarded his injunction not to let Laura know that she came at his bidding. ‘Of course Maurice is very good. But what are you doing with those big books?’

‘I am learning,’ said Laura.

‘Learning!’ said Lady Walworth coming near and looking over her shoulder. ‘What is it all about? “Social Dynamics” “Solidarity of the Human Race” “Classification

of the Sciences'' Why, you will never learn anything out of a prosy book like this. I believe big books only stupefy people. The only way to learn now is to read periodicals and newspapers, and keep your ears open in society. Thank God, people have learned to condense their thoughts nowadays, and everything that is worth remembering can be said in two words—if it were not so we could never keep up with the new ideas. Why, by the time one has plodded through a big book like that, everything in it is found to be untrue. No wonder you get morbid if you read that sort of thing.'

'Who says I am morbid?' asked Laura. 'Not Maurice? Maurice likes me to read this book.'

'No, no, Maurice did not say you were morbid. It is I who say it. He said you were nervous. But I shall tell him

that it is his own fault for making you read this sort of thing. I shall send you a bundle of novels, and now I want you to come for a drive with me. I have some shopping to do, and then I am going to drive out to Wimbledon.'

Laura consented, supposing that the drive had also been arranged by Maurice, and wishing to be obedient.

The drive did her good. The fresh west wind sweeping over Wimbledon Common had a tonic effect on her nerves, and her sister's conversation completed her cure. Rachel was a mistress of the art of turning things with the laughable side upwards, and she put forth all her powers for Laura's benefit, plying her incessantly with ridiculous anecdotes, and theories of life—half-serious and half-burlesque; now making her laugh, then drawing her into argument, and then making her laugh again by some out-

rageous absurdity flung in as sober sense the moment argument began to be too serious. The result was that, when Herne came home in the evening, he found Laura looking more animated than he had seen her for months, and he congratulated himself on having effectively cured a passing humour of depression.

Laura thought she was cured too, and for a few days she kept up the illusion. She desisted for a while from her vain twitchings at the great tangled skein of human things, and tried to work the few threads her fingers had broken from it into a fragment of domestic tapestry. She laughed at herself for having wanted to reform the world, and set about reforming her household. Books on domestic economy succeeded to the Social Dynamics at which Lady Walworth had laughed; she got the cook to teach her

to make an omelette, and announced her intention of henceforth paying the tradesmen herself. The purchase of a very large account-book was another laudable step in the same direction. The keeping of accurate accounts seemed to her a typical act of good housewifery likely to react beneficially on the internal arrangements of a house somewhat as religious exercises react on the pious mind that practises them. Then she discovered that there were a host of small things to be done in the way of beautifying the house—things she had promised to do long ago and never somehow found time for. She did them now, and found them amusing, and grew lighthearted over them.

It was a pretty little comedy she acted, with her conscience for applauding audience. And she quite enjoyed it while it lasted. But unfortunately

it did not last long; like so many great actors she was ill-supported by the remainder of the caste. Her household did not enter into the spirit of the play, and showed a disposition to resent her quickened interest in their doings. She found herself quietly opposed by them; her notions of reform were snubbed; she realised her helplessness and submitted. Conscious of her own inability to sweep, scrub, or cook, she was too honest to give herself airs of superiority towards those who could, and she acquiesced perforce in their decision as to how things should be done. Her attempt at practical control collapsed, and her part in the household was reduced to keeping account of what others did. She wished for real poverty that lives in a cottage and keeps no servants; then she might have done things badly till she learned to do them well, and

recovered self-respect in knowing herself useful. Her own little skein-end would then fairly occupy all her energies, and it would be her duty to be always working at it. In her present circumstances it only grew more ruffled for her finger-ing, and the best thing she could do was *nothing*. And back went her mind to the big problems from which she had lately chidden it away. It was useless to tell her they were no business of hers. Perhaps they were not. Perhaps all her duty in life was to sit contentedly at home and be happy and make her husband happy. She *could* not, that was all. Not while sad faces reproached her in the street, not while the newspapers told awful stories of crime and misery, not while ignorance prevailed and people all around her were groping in darkness, could she be content to use the light that had been revealed to her as a domestic

lamp to illumine her happiness and her husband's. She might be wicked, unreasonable, every way to blame, but she *could* not. Rachel had said that she was morbid. What did morbid mean? she asked herself, suddenly realising that she had the vaguest notions as to the sense of the word. She looked it out in the dictionary. '*Morbid*, diseased, sickly.' She smiled helplessly. People were not generally blamed for being diseased and sickly. Besides, was it a disease to be sorry for people and to want to help them? Maurice used not to say so, nor Cassandra. She would not believe it. It was the world that was to blame—the selfish world that went its own way of enjoyment, careless of the misery of others—like the Florentines who fled from the plague-stricken city to amuse themselves with telling love-tales in a garden. They ought to have stayed

and helped. But then they might have caught the plague and been ill. Diseased, sickly, and consequently much to blame! Laura grew scornful. They might have died and swelled the cankering heaps of corpses. What good in that? To sicken and die was to become a noxious thing, pestilent, poisonous. *Morbid* began to seem a more reasonable word of reproach, flight the least pernicious course. Only she could not fly. She must stay in the infected city and catch its sickness and be blamed for what she could not help. The picture at Ardgwen rose before her. She realised the lot of her ancestress with painful sympathy, the thwarted aspirations, the uncongenial surroundings, the silent suffering, the early death closing a useless life. Likeness of face pointed to likeness in lot. Laura thought she was pitying the sad woman who had died two hundred years ago; but her

tears were for the living one to whose sadness the shadow of the other's fate added a shade of superstitious dread.

This was the point to which she had come on that April morning when the world was making merry and its merriment jarred upon her taste. Her inclination being to weep with those who were weeping, she very naturally resented the invitation of the sunshine to laugh with those who were laughing. There was to be no laughter with her sanction till there was no more weeping. She turned wearily from the window and addressed herself to her weekly task of casting up tradesmen's books, and then when she had ascertained that neither butcher, baker, greengrocer, nor milkman had failed in his addition, she put on her bonnet and went out to pay them.

The streets were crowded, dirty, disagreeable, and Laura almost repented

of having come out. She disliked being jostled by dirty people. However, the alternative of going back to the house and sitting alone with her thoughts till dinner-time, was worse, and she went on. Having paid her bills, she bethought her that a pleasanter way home than through the market-street might be found by going a little round and cutting across a corner of the park. She turned up a little street where two or three shops had lately been converted into a temporary place of worship, of which the Gothic doorway, surmounted by a cross, indicated the High Church character, a hint borne out by the inscription on a neighbouring door, 'Mission House of the Sisterhood of St. Ursula.' Laura had often met the Sisters of St. Ursula in her walks, and they interested her. Were they not, like herself, trying to straighten the tangled skein, and, if they were pulling by another end,

why should that shut them out of her sympathy? Difference of religious direction did not hinder her from feeling for and with the Lady Laura of the picture : why should it divide her from the living women who were doing in fact what her ancestress had pined away in the vain desire to do? She stopped in front of the building with a half-wish to go in and make friends with them. A Sister came to the door with a broom in her hand; she was sweeping out the room preparatory to service. Seeing Laura on the threshold, she thought she must be wanting information.

‘Do you want to come in?’ she asked.

‘Is there service going on?’ Evidently there was not; but Laura did not exactly know what to answer. She had not made up her mind to go in, and yet she did not wish to turn away.

‘Service will not be till half-past five

But the door is always open. You can come in if you like.'

'Thank you,' said Laura; 'I do not think I will come in.'

The Sister's face was unattractive: so was the room, now that she looked into it,—distempered walls stuck about with illuminated texts, deal boards crowded with rush-bottomed chairs, a little altar covered with bright needlework and set out with flowers, seemed to offer no answer to her needs. She wanted warmth of human life and sympathy, and she saw no promise of this here.

'No, I do not think I want to come in,' she said. But she still lingered on the doorstep.

'Would you like to speak to the Mother Superior?' asked the Sister, divining that some inward trouble must be the cause of this apparently purposeless waiting.

‘ No, thank you, not to-day. You said the service was at five, I think ? ’

‘ Half-past five,’ repeated the Sister.

‘ Oh yes, half-past—I had forgotten. Good-morning.’

And Laura walked on up the street, with no intention of coming to the service at whatever time it might be.

She seemed fated to make acquaintance with the Sisters that day. As she was turning the corner to get into the street that would lead her into Regent’s Park, a procession of children in blue linen frocks came upon her. She stood to let them pass ; and, as they went by, more than one turned to look at the ‘ pretty lady.’ One little one in particular looked so long, that, walking with her head turned over her shoulder, she caught her foot in a worn paving-stone and fell prone upon the footway, screaming lustily. Laura started forward and

picked her up, and found herself, in a few seconds, the centre of a little crowd of foot-passengers who paused to look and inquire what was the matter. It was a relief to see a Sister join the group and claim the little one as her charge.

‘I don’t think she is much hurt,’ said Laura preparing to yield her up. But the child had taken a fancy to her and began to cry again at the attempted transference. Her little fingers closed round Laura’s watch chain, and every attempt to loosen them caused fresh screams.

‘Will you not let me carry her home?’ asked Laura. ‘I am really responsible for the accident. She was looking back at me when she fell. May I take her home?’

‘If you will, it will be very kind. But I am afraid you will find her heavy; you do not look very strong.’

The Sister spoke in a tender, compassionate tone. Like many other people that afternoon, she was seized with sudden pity for this young fair woman, who seemed outwardly so blessed, and yet wore such a look of sadness in her face.

‘Is it far?’ asked Laura.

‘No, only to our nursery at the end of the street. You seem fond of children. Perhaps you will like to see our nursery and school.’

‘I should very much.’

Laura felt more inclined to accept the invitations of this Sister than of the other. She was a young, light-haired girl who looked about her own age, with merry dark-blue eyes, and an irregular waving line of mouth that broke continually into smiles as she spoke, making dimples in her cheeks, and showing beautifully white teeth,—the face of a boy-angel, sunny, joyous, and free from

care,—a bright incarnation of unselfish usefulness. Laura walked by her, wondering how a girl like this came to be a Sister of Charity and whether it must not be a good life that could make any one so happy.

The child had fallen asleep by the time they reached the school, and Sister Edith put her to bed in a little crib. Then she showed Laura all the arrangements of the school and the nursery, prattling innocently about every detail, and passing from trivialities to things the most important with a quaint mixture of childish simplicity and womanly responsibility.

‘Do you manage the school entirely yourself?’

‘At present I do, because we are only three, and there is more than enough for the others to do among the sick people about. It is a terrible neighbour-

hood, and there are very few people here who will help us at all.'

Laura blushed. 'I have often wished I could do some useful work among the poor people, but it is so difficult to know *how*.'

'I think it is impossible to do any good unless one gives oneself up to it wholly.'

'You mean unless one becomes a Sister like you.'

'I don't say that it is so with everybody, but I think it is true of most women. I could never have done anything if I had not joined the sisterhood.'

'But everybody cannot be a Sister,' said Laura; 'people have belongings—I am married. I could not leave my husband, even if I wished it.'

'No,' said the Sister, and she looked at Laura with a mingled compassion and curiosity that made her shrink.

‘You surely do not think it wrong to be married?’

‘I was only saying what I thought was the one way of doing this sort of work.’

‘I don’t see why one should not do some work, though one may not give up all one’s life to it.’

Sister Edith shook her head.

‘It is not a question of quantity so much as of quality. You might work ten hours a day at charity, but if your life lay in another world, your work would not be of much use. You see we Sisters are as poor as the people we want to help. We have nothing at all of our own, and the Mission has very little. We very often do not know how we shall make out to-morrow’s meal. And the people know this, and what we give them they value, because they know that it is a sacrifice of the simplest

necessaries of life. And there is more than that I think. We have no life outside our work except our religious life. And the people know this, and so, when we speak to them of the blessings of religion, they believe that we mean what we say.'

'How long have you been a Sister?' asked Laura.

'Ten years.'

Laura looked almost incredulous.

'You thought I was much younger than I am. Everybody does. I am twenty-eight. I came here when I was eighteen, and I have never repented it. It is the best life, I think, that is possible in the world now—the most true to Christianity, and the one in which there is least conflict.'

'You seem to forget,' said Laura, 'that it is a life impossible to most people. And as for conflict, one does

not choose it. It comes in spite of oneself. It is not possible for everybody to be a Sister of Charity.'

She spoke impatiently. There was something provoking in the Sister's calm assumption that her own way of life was the one right way, the more so that Laura was much inclined to agree with her. The statement so quietly made that no redeeming work was to be done except by entire devotion and renunciation of all personal ends found a full echo in her own heart, but she felt nevertheless an unreasonable resentment against the implied blame to herself as one who lingered in the world.

'There is surely other work to be done besides that of a Sister of Charity?' she said, feeling however quite at a loss to say what the work might be.

'Possibly,' answered the Sister; 'but

I know nothing of it. I only say that this sort of work can be done in no way but this. It was the work I wanted to do. I know nothing of other work.'

'It is the work *I* want to do. It is the only work that seems to me worth doing. But I can do nothing. I am married, and my husband is absorbed in other things. What am I to do?'

With a sudden impulse Laura had thrown off concealment. The calm conviction that had provoked her a moment ago, attracted her now. This young woman had evidently solved the problem of life: she had chosen and had not repented. It was an instinctive act to ask guidance of her.

Sister Edith did not answer at once. Laura's appeal struck a chord in her that had been long silent. It awakened emotions that had vibrated painfully in the days when the choice was not yet

taken that had ended conflict before the time when conflict may be most terrible. She had found shelter from the storm while it only brooded imminent in clouds of threatening outline, and she had no counsel for those who were in the thick of it—only compassion and an impotent wish that the world were ordered otherwise.

‘What shall I do?’ Laura asked again, unsuspecting that the silence of oracles is often but the expression of their ignorance. It seemed impossible that one who was so contented herself should have no talisman for healing the discontent of others. ‘What shall I do?’ she repeated imperatively.

Pressed to answer, Sister Edith spoke of the memories Laura had awakened. She said, ‘You feel as I used to feel. It was that that made me leave the world. I could not help thinking of all

the misery around me. It haunted me so that all enjoyment seemed wrong, and the only life that was not wicked and unchristian, one that should be at all points like that of our Saviour Himself.'

She bowed her head solemnly, and Laura, under the influence of a strong sympathy, bowed hers also, forgetful that Christianity lay behind her, and that the life of Christ was no longer to her a type divinely given for imitation.

'Every other life,' continued the Sister, 'seemed to me not only wrong but unhappy, and yet when I spoke of what I felt to others, they said I was unreasonable. People used to tell me that the times were changed, and that right and wrong changed with the times, so that what was very beautiful and good eighteen hundred years ago would only lead to confusion if it were tried now. I

was too ignorant to answer them, but they could not convince me, and at last I followed my impulse and became a Sister of Charity. I have never repented it. I have been working ten years now, and I am happy.'

Laura was disappointed. This practical argument, 'I have never repented,' seemed the only arrow in Sister Edith's quiver—sufficient for herself, but useless for all besides. Of what good was it to her, whose duty lay in the world, to be told again and again that for those who had left it there was peace? She began to rebel against a content that was so self-centred: she said to herself that these Sisters were no better than the rest of the world—they shut their eyes and ears and cried peace when it was evident to all who were not blind and deaf that there was as yet no peace. She said what she felt:—

‘But what right have you to be so happy? There is still misery in the world. And if it was the misery that made you sad before, it ought to make you sad still. I think it is a sort of childishness to be happy just because one is busy oneself.’

The rudeness of the speech was condoned by the evident distress of the speaker.

Sister Edith answered quietly,—

‘The misery is still there certainly, but it no longer reproaches me with looking on and doing nothing to hinder it from spreading. We do what we can, and trust God for the rest. I do not think that can be childish, unless all God’s teaching is false, and then indeed we must be without hope.’

‘I beg your pardon, I had forgotten——’

Laura broke off in her apology. She had forgotten that the Sisters believed

in God, and had not therefore the weight of all the world's woes pressing on their spirits. They had but to do their duty and report faithfully to their taskmaster—the rest was in stronger hands. But she had no such trust, she could only look from the chaos of outside things to the impotence within herself, and find no rest in either.

The bell that had been tolling for the last ten minutes stopped its monotonous summons, and the half-hour struck.

‘It is time for evensong,’ said the Sister quietly. ‘Will you come with me?’

‘Not to-day,’ said Laura.

‘Then I must say good-bye to you.’

‘May I come and see you again?’

‘Whenever you like.’

‘And work with you? I could teach the little children. I should like it.’

‘I cannot stay now,’ said the Sister;

and her black robe flitted through the doorway.

Laura stood for a few moments looking after her. She felt that her petition had been rejected, she was not to be allowed to work with the Sisters. Perhaps they knew about her, and disapproved of her as an infidel. They certainly would disapprove, if they knew. Any way, there was no help for her at the Mission House. She gathered up her gown and began to walk sadly home. As she went, she thought over the conversation with Sister Edith and came to the conclusion that she was wrong. But then who was right? She wished Cassandra would come and see her. But Cassandra always made excuses when she asked her to come and stay with her, and lately she had not even written. She wished somebody would advise her with authority, and she looked up and stared into the eyes of

the first person who met her in the street.

It was Cassandra, come like a miraculous answer to prayer. She fell upon her, and in another minute they were walking to Chester Place together.



CHAPTER II.

‘It is as impossible now, as in the days of our first parents, to believe that the garden of Eden is the lurking-place of the serpent of temptation.’

ASSANDRA was staying with the Annesleys. She had been in London three weeks, and did not know how much longer she might stay. So much Laura learned from her in the course of their walk home, but more she at first refused to tell, though Laura clamoured for why and wherefore. She was mysterious, evasive, fantastical, to a point that was exasperating. But then she was affectionate, bright, and animated to a point that was delightful.

And Laura could not be angry with her. She repaid her reserve by a flow of confidence, if one may call confidences those disingenuous narratives that we all indulge in sometimes, in which nothing is true but the chronicle of objective facts, nothing false but the treatment of our moods in experiencing them. Laura talked on, laughed at the slavery in which her servants held her, made light of the disappointment about Ardgwen, described her interview with the Sister of Charity, and said it had effectually cured her of all illusions about convent life, and reminded Cassandra of her cynical saying that people only renounced the world when their own folly had made it too hot for them. I was going to say that she acted well, and took Cassandra in. But on second thoughts I doubt whether she was acting. She felt better for seeing Cassandra, and all things

looked suddenly bright to her. She could not help painting them in bright colours.

Cassandra believed her to be perfectly happy, and was honestly thankful that it was so; not only for Laura's sake, but because her own future was thereby cleared of difficulties. In coming to London she had meant to keep out of the way of Herne and Laura. She had anticipated some difficulty in doing so, but she was resolved to do it at all cost rather than risk coming between husband and wife. But now, as she sat in Laura's drawing-room and heard her talking about her life with what she took for full content, she began to think that her determination to keep away had been unnecessary and that she might safely keep up her friendship with them. In fact, to do so seemed now a safer course than the other, which would of course

surprise Laura and set her seeking for a cause,—a search which could hardly miss its end.

Laura, having told her own story, renewed her pressure for Cassandra's. And Cassandra became more communicative. She confessed that her presence in London meant more than an ordinary visit. She had plans, but at present they were unformed and she did not want them talked about.

‘And I suppose that was why you kept away from me. You could not trust me to keep your secrets.’

‘Exactly: you would have told Maurice, and he would have told all the men in his office, and my plans would have been all over London before a week was out.’

‘But you are going to tell them me now?’

Yes, Cassandra would be communi-

cative now, since further attempt at mystery could only rouse inconvenient suspicion. She told Laura that she had made up her mind to break away from her home life and find some work in London by which she could live. Laura was surprised at first, then thought it the most natural thing in the world. Of course all the ways of life at Nant-y-Gwyn must be intolerable to Cassandra. She wondered that she could have borne with them so long. It would be much better for her to be in London, where she could have congenial society and be quite honest about her opinions; and it would be so pleasant to have her near. But what work was she going to do?

Ah, that was the difficulty. There was such a dearth of work for women, and what there was was so ill-paid.

‘It is—very,’ said Laura.

‘ So say the Annesleys. They feel so strongly about it that they are agitating for getting women enfranchised.

‘ But will that give them work ? ’

Cassandra shrugged her shoulders.

‘ They say so. But in the meanwhile I am half-expecting to have to give up all my plans because I cannot find any work on which I can live like a lady.’

‘ And you *must* live like a lady,’ said Laura.

As soon as she had spoken, she thought of the Sisters of St. Ursula, who lived so unlike ladies, and she wondered which was the sincere mood in her,—that which envied them half-an-hour ago, or that which now decided that Cassandra’s life must be an easy one. The old habit of leaning on her cousin came to her help, and she trusted the present mood because Cassandra said, ‘ I certainly *wish* to live like a lady.’

‘Of course you *must* live like a lady,’ Laura said again. And then she added with a sigh, ‘Oh dear me, I wish we were rich; that would make everything easy.’

‘I wish *I* were,’ said Cassandra. And they both laughed.

Then Laura said,—

‘But there can’t really be any difficulty for you. You are so clever. You could make a fortune in fifty ways. You sing, play, draw, and do everything better than any one else. If I were you I would be rich in a year. What do the Annesleys advise you to do?’

‘To take two rooms somewhere and have classes. I am to teach girls everything that they ought to know, no matter whether I know it myself or not.’

‘To teach?’ Laura made a face of disapprobation.

‘And why not teach?’

‘Because you might do something more amusing. You might write books, or paint pictures, or sing. If I were you, I should sing at concerts.’

‘I could never give singing-lessons,’ said Cassandra. ‘Pray don’t propose that again. In the first place I should fail, and in the second place I should hate it.’

‘But why?’

‘Because I am sentimental enough to hate the idea of selling the best thing about me.’

‘Then you will teach,’ said Laura, ‘and I shall come to your classes and learn everything I ought to know.’

‘My classes will be for girls, not for married women. And now I am going.’

‘No, you will stay to dinner.’

‘The Annesleys expect me. Good-bye.’

She had heard the click of a latch-key in the door—Maurice was coming in. She

had intended to escape before his return. That being now impossible, she would at least avoid meeting him in Laura's presence. It would be less confusing to fall in with him on her way out. The necessary courtesies of opening the door for her and finding her umbrella would cover embarrassment.

They met in the hall, and greeted one another with perfect composure. He inquired how she was going, and walked with her to the nearest cab-stand; and as they went they talked of the chances of a European war. They might have been merest acquaintances. But as he closed the cab-door and wished her good-bye, he asked if she would be coming to see Laura again. She answered that she hoped to do so.

'It will be kind of you,' he said; and she turned away with a choking sensation in her throat.

She came again very soon, and on her second visit the impression of the first was confirmed. She went away satisfied that Laura's happiness was complete, and that her presence in Chester Place was fraught with no danger to the peace of the house. So she allowed herself to come again and again, taking care however to be gone before the hour when Maurice habitually returned from his office.

This was at first. Later on she let herself be persuaded to stay to dinner, and then the three had very pleasant evenings. The atmosphere was clear, talk unembarrassed. Laura's year of married life had considerably developed her powers of conversation; she took her part freely, and was especially good as a third, while Cassandra was excellent as a leader—fearless, versatile, original. All the subjects Laura had grown shy of alluding to,

were boldly introduced by her. She assumed as a matter of course that Herne was of unchanged mind on all questions, and that Laura was with him. And the result was that Laura began to think she had been the victim of delusions. Maurice still meant all he used to say, he was only too busy for action just now.

In a little while Cassandra found suitable lodgings in Wimpole Street, and, from the time she was established in them, hardly a day passed without a meeting between her and Laura. They were constantly together, reading, walking, talking: it was like old times at Nant-y-Gwyn. Laura threw herself heartily into Cassandra's plans and took much trouble to get pupils for her. She was busier about it than Cassandra herself, and being busy—oh tell it not to Sister Edith!—grew quite happy. Things were so changed with her that when Whitsuntide came

she hardly wished to go to Ardgwen because it would interfere with her being present at Cassandra's first lecture.

Cassandra had misgivings sometimes, but she always silenced them with the thought that Laura was quite happy. The past was dead for everybody but herself—dead and buried beneath their happiness. They were safe, and she need only think of herself. Why then should she cut herself off from their friendship when it made all the difference between a life that was bearable and one that was not? She assured herself that there was no danger, and resolved to go on as she had begun.

Laura could not quite reconcile herself to Cassandra's doing no more brilliant work than teaching. She racked her brain to think of something else for her, and the idea of public readings occurred to her. She proposed it one evening at

dinner. Cassandra did not altogether repudiate it. She was conscious of being able to read well, and was not insensible to the pleasure of doing publicly what she excelled in. Her fastidiousness about singing professionally was a thing by itself. Singing had associations for her that made it unmarketable. But reading was different.

Laura was delighted that her suggestion should be received with favour, and she developed the idea. Cassandra must not read quite publicly, but in drawing-rooms at evening parties. She would begin at Rachel's and become the fashion immediately, and her fortune would be made. She appealed to Maurice whether the idea was not excellent. He thought it might answer very well, and began to consider what Cassandra might read.

Laura suggested Shakespeare. But Maurice thought that would not do.

The preponderance of the dramatic element made it a field full of danger for any one who had no experience of the stage, especially for a woman. Besides, everybody had preconceived ideas as to how Shakespeare should be read,—she would find her audience in the most difficult of all critical attitudes. No one should attempt Shakespearian readings who had not already an established fame.

Cassandra asked how it would do to read from the literature of other languages. She was a good linguist, and could trust her accent in French, German, or Italian. Herne thought better of this idea. Society was getting curious about foreign literature, and would probably jump at an opportunity of improving acquaintance with it by listening instead of reading.

The idea was not allowed to drop: it grew in favour the more they discussed

it. Soon Lady Walworth was taken into council, and she undertook to sound society on the subject. But the result was not encouraging. She reported that the number of people, who knew any foreign language well enough to care to hear readings in it, was too small to be depended upon for audiences, and the scheme had to be given up, much to Cassandra's disappointment. For while it was under consideration she had made one or two experiments in reading to very small audiences at the Hernes' house with a success that had been decidedly encouraging. She had enjoyed the actual reading, and the admiration she won had been pleasant to her. It had stimulated the appetite for applause that made part of her artist nature, and was in the ascendant now that other sides of her character were under a necessity of suppression. She frankly

recognised that an artistic career of some kind would add an element of positive enjoyment to her existence, which would make the life of work she had chosen far more congenial to her than it could be otherwise. Her standing in society would be the surer for it: it would make her valued in the world. And to be valued was not less pleasant to her than to most people. It was therefore a keen disappointment to her when the idea of the readings had to be abandoned.

Before long, however, it was revived in another form. Gounod's *Faust e Margherita* had just been brought out in London, and society, having seen the opera, fancied it knew the poem. Everybody was talking Faust, Mephistopheles was the fashion, and girls whose ears might not be defiled by mention of real Gretchens were appearing at fancy balls in the costume of Margherita.

Cassandra went with Maurice and Laura to hear the opera, and they talked of it afterwards. Laura was among the many who did not know the Faust of Goethe. Cassandra insisted that she must read it at once.

‘It provokes me,’ she said, ‘that people should see the opera and come away thinking it is all that Goethe meant. To my mind the meaning of the drama is entirely lost when the central interest is transferred from Faust to Gretchen. It is almost absurd as it stands in the opera version,—heaven, earth, and hell called into play just to bring about the ruin of one poor girl. The machinery is out of all proportion to the result. Whereas in the original you see that Gretchen’s destruction is only one chapter among many,—the first and the saddest perhaps, but still only one among many in the history of Faust. He tries

in turn every experience of life, and finds none satisfying till he devotes himself at last to the work of reclaiming some marsh lands and making them fit for human habitation. While he works at this he finds himself happy and wishes life would last for ever. And as he breathes the wish, his bond with the devil is loosed, and he is saved: he has found a happiness that is useful to mankind. It is a splendid conception, the most splendid in all literature, I think. It makes me angry to see it degraded as it is in this opera version. We must read the original together, Laura.'

But Laura's German was not equal to the task, and translations were in request. Herne had two or three in his library, but he had objections to all of them.

Cassandra wondered whether it was possible that he had entirely forgotten

hers, till one day he ended her wondering by speaking of it.

‘*You* once made a translation of *Faust*,’ he said; ‘it was better than any other I ever read. What have you done with it?’

Cassandra told the truth. It was finished, and she had lately had thoughts of publishing it. Herne said this was the very moment for bringing it out, and Laura asked her to bring it to their house next evening and read it to them.

Without reflecting, she promised to do so.

She wondered afterwards at having so promised. The work was so bound up with her past relations with Herne, that to read it in his presence could not but be dangerous, and, in truth, what had deterred her from publishing it during the last year, was a shrinking from the open reminder that it would

be to both of them. As she went home she thought she would find an excuse for not reading it.

But next evening found her at their house, installed in her reading-chair with the manuscript before her.

She had translated the whole work in accordance with her view that the first part was never meant to stand alone, and the work of reading it occupied several evenings.

She had not to complain of any want of sympathy in her hearers. Laura was almost as much possessed by the revelation of the drama as she had been herself. Herne said over and over again that it was a work of genius, and that no translation that had ever yet been given to the world came near it. It must be published at once, and it would make her famous.

None of the three ever knew with

whom originated the idea that Cassandra should give a public reading from this translation. But somehow one evening they found themselves discussing the plan. Cassandra had thought of it often and was ready with detail. The whole would of course be too long and tedious, and moreover many scenes might be omitted with advantage from her point of view, which was that it was desirable to give people an idea of the whole scheme of the poem. She proposed to read the most characteristic scenes of the first part, and then give a sketch of the scheme of the second, quoting freely from the text, but reading no scene except the final one.

Herne thought the idea excellent. The readings would succeed in themselves and they would be the best possible advertisement for the book when it should appear in its entirety.

‘It is a charming plan,’ Laura said; ‘and I shall go to-morrow and tell Rachel that she must get up a reading for you at her house. We will have one here first, won’t we, Maurice? And the grand performance at Rachel’s will take place on the day after. It will be delightful!’

Herne was quite of Laura’s mind, and the thing was considered settled.

Herne walked home with Cassandra that evening, and they talked together as they used to talk in the days of their early friendship. Suddenly they found themselves speaking of the dialogue that was to have appeared with the translation, and from that they got to Herne’s own neglected work. Cassandra spoke warmly of the importance of completing it. He answered in a tone of depression, spoke of want of time, of the difficulties of his position; and finally he confessed

to a growing weariness and scepticism that made a truer reason than any of the others. Cassandra answered sympathetically, then suddenly grew reserved; and they finished their way in uncomfortable silence.

She took home with her that night a stronger doubt than she had had before as to the safety of her present course.

But next evening brought a note from Laura saying that she and Rachel had talked over the new plan, and that nothing remained but to settle details. Would Cassandra come in the evening and meet Rachel?

And once more she said to herself, 'They are happy: no harm can come.' And she went in the evening and let Herne walk home with her again.



CHAPTER III.

‘Life has many silent chapters before that last one we call death : of inarticulate communions and suppressed sympathies ; of resisted instincts and evaded destinies ; of promises given and broken without so much as a whisper in the ear ; of swift glancings into that abyss of the irrevocable, where all things are made plain in the day that is too late.’

IT was arranged that the *Faust* reading should take place towards the end of July.

Laura was eager for an earlier date, but there were strong reasons for making it as late as possible.

Cassandra was advised by persons of experience not to attempt reading professionally without going through some systematic training. Her voice was

good, and, for an amateur, she was rarely skilful in the management of it. But she readily appreciated the difference between the style of delivery demanded by dramatic reading and the simpler manner of which her own taste had made her master, and she believed that she might gain much by taking lessons from some person skilled in the arts of the stage. Lady Walworth supported her in this view, the more warmly that she had a coach to recommend,—a certain Mr. William son who lived at Brompton and was the most charming man in the world, with the most charming wife, and every possible recommendation for Cassandra's purpose. He had been known to the theatre-going world many years ago under the name of Meredith Taylor, but for a long time he had been living in retirement. Lady Walworth was

not sure whether he still gave lessons in a regular way, but she had no doubt of his being willing to teach Cassandra as a favour to herself. She drove her to Brompton at once, and arrangements were made for a course of lessons.

It was another advantage of putting the reading off till late in the season, that in the meanwhile Cassandra could make way in society. At Lady Walworth's house she was to be introduced to all the most remarkable people in London; and there was little fear of her not holding her own among them. She was soon very much in request. The beautiful Miss Gwynne with the aristocratic air, who was Lord St. Asaph's niece, and yet chose to live in lodgings and drudge at teaching school-girls, was a sort of heroine of romance, and everybody wanted to be introduced to her. Lady

Walworth was pressed to take her everywhere. She created a sensation, and people compared her to historical beauties. Then the fame of her voice got abroad, and she was persuaded to sing, and others made the suggestion Laura had once hazarded. But she would not listen to it. Her determination was firm, she would not put all her gifts into the market. People might buy her reading, but they should beg for her songs. She would accept no bonds in music.

What with her classes, and her training in reading, and the numerous social engagements that her popularity dragged her into, her days were very full, and as the summer went on she became a less frequent visitor in Chester Place.

Laura missed her and began to feel dull again. She taxed her with neglecting her, and Cassandra laid the blame on the pressure of work. She could not

help herself. It was essential to her success that she should go as much as possible into society. 'I am making friends of the mammon of unrighteousness,' she said.

Laura admitted the plea and gave a sigh of envy. Her own life looked dull by the side of Cassandra's brilliant career. She felt like a little household fire that is killed by the sunshine. The old morbid moods came back upon her, and one day she made an attempt to confide in her cousin. It was shortly after she had remonstrated with her on her neglect and Cassandra had made an effort to come oftener. She had come in just as Laura was reading the last page of a novel, parting with hero and heroine at the steps of the altar, and wishing she could know something of their after-life.

'I wish,' Laura said, 'that novels did

not always end at marriage. When I have followed people through their love-making, I always want to know how they got on in their married life. And books always assume that that must be happy. I doubt whether it is so always—don't you ?'

'One certainly must suppose that there are exceptions, otherwise what would the divorce courts be so busy about? But on the whole I don't think novels about unhappy married life are the most edifying. For there *are* some, you know, if you really want to read them.' And she mentioned a number of books in which the sorrows of matrimony were laid bare.

'I don't think I meant that kind of thing,' said Laura; 'but it seems to me that it would be fairer if novels sometimes showed the little troubles and difficulties and disappointments that come

to married people even when they are fond of one another. I think if I wrote novels, that is what I should describe.'

'Then you would do a very wrong thing,' said Cassandra, seeing through Laura's strictures on novels, and reading in a moment that her happiness was not so secure as she had hitherto believed it. She spoke with sharp emphasis, taking care not to meet Laura's eyes. She was determined not to be the recipient of confidences on the subject of Laura's married life. 'You would do a very wrong thing,' she said. 'The novelists are quite right in generally ending their third volume with the wedding. Marriage is a sort of death through which people pass into eternal silence. To make revelations about one's married life is to be a ghost, and those who do it deserve the sort of reception we give to ghosts.'

‘What a ghastly comparison!’ said Laura with a shiver.

‘It is rather, but it has taken hold of my fancy. Henceforth whenever people moan to me about the troubles of their married life, I shall tell them they are ghosts and ought to go back and lie quietly in their graves.’

Laura was glad she had not rushed into more direct confidence. She changed the subject, and during the rest of Cassandra’s visit she lost no opportunity of saying affectionate things about her husband which might undo the effect her words had evidently had.

But her artifices were vain. Cassandra’s eyes, once opened, were not to be easily closed. As she walked away from the house, she recognised with a sense of terror that the perfect sympathy between Laura and Herne, to which she had trusted as a safe foundation for her

own future, was an illusion. Laura was sad at heart. Herne was probably disappointed also, and her position, as their friend, might at any moment become dangerous. She saw him coming along the street, and she crossed to the other side of the way in order to avoid meeting him.

Next day she kept away from Chester Place in spite of a pathetic note from Laura saying that she was still unwell and would be obliged to give up a party in Arlington Street. Cassandra sent word that she was too busy to come, and spent the afternoon in an objectless ramble through back streets where she was unlikely to meet friends.

The party in Arlington Street was to be an event in Cassandra's career. Lady Walworth had so timed the issue of the circulars advertising the *Faust* reading that they would be in the hands of all

her friends before they assembled at her house that evening. They would come full of curiosity on the subject, and would be glad to meet Cassandra. Then there was to be a musical performance by several amateurs, among whom Cassandra was to be the chief star. She was to entrance her audience and send everybody home determined to come and hear her read. That was Lady Walworth's plan, communicated some days before to Cassandra, who was pledged to make it succeed.

Cassandra arrived late and was chidden by her hostess for so doing.

‘Everybody is asking for you. You are the heroine of the evening. I have had fifty petitions for tickets for the 28th. *Petitions*, if you please. London is on its knees for the privilege of hearing you. You will have an ovation. Let me introduce you to the Princess ——’

Cassandra was introduced to the Princess ——, and heard that she was coming to her reading.

‘I have heard so much of your reading from common friends,’ she said. ‘It is very good of you to give us all an opportunity of hearing it. Let me present my husband to you. He admires your singing greatly. He heard you here at the beginning of the season and has raved about you ever since.’

It was time for the musical performance; Cassandra was led to her place by the Prince. She bowed like a queen as he seated her by the piano, and thanked him with an absent air. Then she turned to the instrument and swept her hands over the keys; and in a moment she had forgotten Prince and everybody present.

Lady Walworth had distributed written programmes among her guests, as a hint that the singing was to be attended to

seriously. Cassandra had promised to begin with 'Auf Flügeln des Gesanges.' It was one of her most popular songs, and she knew people were counting on it. But it was impossible to sing it. She remembered the night at Ardgwen when it had lifted her into heaven and brought Herne back to her. It could not bring him back now, nor could it carry her to heaven. Music had ceased to be a sanctuary closed against pain. Her trouble pursued her into it. She would be in hell while she sang of heaven. She would sing something else, and let people say what they liked.

She chose the song of Sappho from Rossi's opera, 'Ah rendimi quel core,' and gave the rein to her emotions. The song was a perfect expression of them, and the effect upon the audience was overwhelming. Sappho herself could not have sung her sorrows with more

real passion. Strangers were taken by storm, and those who knew her singing best were startled.

The Prince said to his wife, 'Did I not tell you she was a miracle? It is as if all the pains of mankind had found voice at last and were singing their story from the beginning of the world up till now.'

'It is terrible,' answered the Princess; 'one's heart aches to think what she must have suffered.—Ah, Mr. Herne, I did not see you before. I hope you were in time to hear the song.'

Herne passed on with a bow. He had been in time to hear it from the door,—he was on his way to the piano.

Cassandra thought she started at sight of him. But she was outwardly motionless. The only change perceptible in her was a relaxation of the tense expression her brow had borne while she sang.

She held out her hand to him and said,—

‘So you are here after all. I hope Laura is better.’

‘She is better. She would not let me stay with her.’

Cassandra made no answer. Her eyes fell guiltily. She would have given worlds to know whether he had been in time to hear her sing. But for worlds she could not ask him.

Somebody said, ‘You did well to disregard the programme. You are never so great as in “Ah rendimi.” You were supreme in it to-night.’

‘It was a sudden caprice. I took fright at “Wings of Song” as I sat down, and, as you say, I know I can always trust myself in “Ah rendimi.”’

Herne was still standing by her. She tried to look him frankly in the face, but

again her eyes fell, and she was conscious of blushing deeply.

‘Let me take you downstairs,’ he said; ‘this room is stifling.’

She rose involuntarily, and was putting her arm in his when she saw Lady Mary’s eye fixed unpleasantly upon them from the other end of the room—she was watching them with evident suspicion. Cassandra drew back and declined refreshments. She would stay where she was.

Herne pressed her. But she was resolute, and she turned away from him to receive compliments from others. Then, in a moment, she repented, and asked him to take her down. It seemed to her that, if she gave way now to this foolish self-consciousness, she would never be easy in his presence again. It was a feeling that must be overcome at once, unless she meant to go back from all her plans and break openly with him and Laura.

They passed close to Lady Mary on their way down, and Cassandra made a point of stopping to speak to her.

Lady Mary asked pointedly after Laura, and Herne made the same answer to her that he had given Cassandra five minutes ago.

The refreshment room was hotter than the drawing-room and more crowded. They looked in and turned away.

‘Come out into the air,’ Herne said, and he led her into the garden behind the house.

The night was sultry, and heavy with the scent of flowers. A fountain was playing in the moonlight. Another couple crossed them as they went out—a young girl in a white gown leaning on a man’s arm. She was saying,—

‘I wish she had not sung. There was something in her voice that troubled me—it will haunt me. And she looked so sad.’

The man answered lightly.

‘She sings magnificently, and she’s a great actress—the trouble was not hers, but Sappho’s.—But hush!’

He had caught sight of them, and he stopped abruptly.

Cassandra looked up at Herne—their eyes met; hers fell again in an instant, and she withdrew her arm from his.

‘What are you going to do?’ he asked.

She started.

‘I?—oh, I don’t know. It is hot, suffocatingly hot. Don’t you find it so?’

‘I thought you would like to walk a little.’

She took his arm again, and they walked up and down for some minutes; and, when they came back to the drawing-room and Cassandra tried to remember of what they had spoken, she discovered that they had been silent.

She had not realised it at the time,—the silence had been drowned by the tumult of her emotions. Herne took her back to the piano and seemed disposed to stay by her while she sang. She felt his presence like an oppressive atmosphere. It seemed to choke her—she could not find voice for a single note.

‘Please go,’ she murmured, and he left her side; and, by the time she had ended her song, he was gone altogether.

The rest of the evening passed like a triumph. She was introduced to one person after another till she was in hopeless confusion as to the names of her new acquaintance and in danger of going to luncheon with people who had asked her to dinner, and to dinner with people who wanted to see her at five o’clock tea. Lady Walworth kept her till all the other guests were gone, and embraced her rapturously as soon as they were alone.

‘You were perfect,’ she said with enthusiasm. ‘Your success is sure. You must stay at home all to-morrow afternoon. Everybody is going to call on you.’

‘I shall be busy with my class to-morrow afternoon,’ said Cassandra. ‘Everybody will have to be content with leaving cards.’

‘Better and better. Duchesses will drive up to your lodging and be told that you cannot see them because you are engaged in teaching half-a-dozen school-girls. That’s what I call a triumph of genius. I shall not like you half so well when you have made a fortune and set up a carriage. By-the-by, how are you thinking of getting home to-night? Everybody, who might have taken you, is gone. Are you expecting a Cinderella’s coach?’

‘I am trusting to a cab. You know

that I always come and go independently. May I ring and ask for one?’

‘Certainly. But, dear me, it was a success beyond anything I ever dreamed of! Do you know what Burrell Jones said after your first song?’

‘No,’ said Cassandra absently.

‘Don’t pretend not to care. Burrell Jones is the greatest man in London—at least he might have been if we had not spoiled him. His opinion is worth having. Confess that you want to hear it.’

‘I do.’

‘Well then, he said that he never conceived it possible before that he should envy a woman, but that he would give all he had to be able to move a congregation as you moved us to-night.’

Cassandra smiled.

‘And I think I would give all I am ever likely to have for the chance of moving a congregation instead of an audience.’

The servant had answered the bell and was waiting for orders. Rachel had forgotten for what they had rung.

‘What was it we wanted, Cassandra?’

‘A four-wheeled cab to take me home, if you please.’

The servant left the room, and Rachel burst out laughing.

‘You can’t go home in a cab by yourself.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because it is preposterous—out of the question. Why did Maurice Herne desert you? He is your recognised knight. It is unpardonable of him.’

‘Maurice went early. Laura is not well.’

‘Ah, true, I had forgotten. One forgets everything on nights like this. But all the same you cannot go alone.’

‘Certainly not,’ said Lord Walworth; ‘I will go with her.’

Cassandra accepted the escort gratefully. She talked politics brilliantly above the rattle of the cab as they drove together to her lodging, and left Lord Walworth on the doorstep amazed at her versatility, and wondering how he had never discovered before what an astonishing genius his wife's cousin was.

And then, having let herself in with a latch-key, she crept up to her room and threw herself sobbing on her bed.



CHAPTER IV.

‘Surely my strength shall be in her, my help and protection about her ;

Surely in inner-sweet gladness and vigour of joy shall sustain her,

Till, the brief winter o’erpast, her own true sap in the spring-tide

Rise, and the tree I have bared be verdurous e’en as aforetime.’

CASSANDRA used to go three times a week to Brompton for her lesson from Mr. Williamson. And before going home after it, she habitually turned into Kensington Gardens and spent an hour or so in walking up and down under the trees, reading over the passages she had studied in her lesson, and considering the suggestions of her master.

These walks among the great trees were very pleasant to her—her day had no happier hour than that which was so spent. She enjoyed her lessons from the old actor, who was proud of her and took infinite pains to make her perfect at all points, and generally ended his instructions by telling her that she would soon know far more than he could teach her, and that next season she would be amused to think she had been his pupil. She had a filial feeling towards the old man, and found an innocent refreshment in dwelling on the interest he took in her success. It seemed a purer thing to her than most of the admiration she received, and she felt that her best work was done under its influence. It roused the nobler side of the artist in her by setting before her a perfection she recognised as beyond her. The very humiliation of having her short-

comings pointed out was welcome as a counterweight to the ignorant praises of which she received so many. She rejoiced that there were difficulties to be overcome and courted ruggednesses in her work. They were welcome to her as tests of her seriousness, as means of convincing herself that she was an artist in earnest, and not a mere dilettante in love with nothing of art but the applause it wins. She was in truth very hungry for anything that might feed her self-respect and help her to hold her head up before the world.

For the sense of guilt to which she had awakened on the evening of Lady Walworth's party had never left her since. In vain she argued with herself that she was doing no wrong, that her relations with Herne were pure, her conduct to Laura loyal; she could not rid herself of the sense of guilt that

had made her glance fall abashed before his in spite of three successive efforts to look him simply in the face. She had tried more than once to disregard her embarrassment and talk freely with him; but conversation invariably drifted dangerously, or ended abruptly in an oppressive silence. She was uneasy in his presence, restless in his absence. She avoided his house as much as possible, only going when Laura's invitations were too pressing to admit of denial, and always coming away before he returned.

Once or twice she had thought that Laura's manner was changed to her, and had felt that it would be almost a relief to be reproached by her, and so have occasion for an open quarrel that would put an end to the doubtful position in which she now stood. But Laura's coldness—if coldness it really were—was

always quickly followed by some special manifestation of affection, and Cassandra came to the conclusion that the change she fancied had no existence outside her imagination. So long as Laura prayed her to come and see her, it could not be wrong to go, for her conscience absolved her of in any way seeking the attentions of Herne: she knew that she consistently repelled them. She could not hinder him from admiring her singing. And after all, had he said a thousandth part in praise of it of what all her world was saying? Would not absolute silence have been far more marked? Was it not insanity on her part to think so much of a word from him when he was only one in a large chorus? Would she not learn indifference in time, and be glad by-and-by, when she had conquered this woman's weakness, that she had not given occasion to scandal

by a self-condemning retreat? Such questions were continually with her. She could not answer them. She simply went on in spite of them.

However, they did not pursue her into Kensington Gardens. That was her place of peace and holy influence. She felt an innocent woman as she paced up and down among the glades, absorbed in her manuscript. And frequenters of the spot who came to know her by sight and to look for her at her usual hour, never dreamed that any trouble haunted her, and though they observed that she avoided notice as much as possible, they thought it was only that she might pursue her studies undisturbed.

But one evening, as she was so engaged, she started suddenly and felt the blood rush to her cheeks at the sound of a footstep gaining upon her from behind. She tightened the roll of her manuscript

and hastened on. Her pursuer hastened also, and in another minute was beside her.

‘Why have you done this?’ she said, without lifting her eyes from the ground.

Herne did not answer, but walked by her side in silence.

She made a conventional remark on the sweetness of the evening, to which he replied conventionally. Then they were silent again. He led her deeper into the grove, and she followed his lead in painful expectation.

He touched the roll of manuscript in her hand, and said, ‘You were studying your *Faust*. Will you let me look at it?’

She let him take the paper from her, and he began reading aloud from it.

‘Do you remember the day you wrote that?’ he said.

‘It was about this time of the year,’ she answered, ‘a beautiful summer

evening. We were sitting under the ash-tree that leans over the stream on the south side of the park. I remember it. But it would be better to forget.'

'It is not possible to forget,' said Herne.

Cassandra was silent. He read on, and with every line a picture from the past rose before her eyes.

'No,' she said; 'it is *not* possible to forget.'

'But you thought I had forgotten.'

'You gave me reason to believe so. Of what use is it to remember if——' She did not complete the sentence: a sob choked her speech.

He took her hand and held it.

'You were going to say, if one is not loyal to that which one remembers.'

'I do not know what I was going to say. It is better to say nothing, I think. Maurice, it is better that we should not

meet. Why have you followed me here to-night? This has been my place of refuge,—the only place that was not poisoned for me by thoughts of which I am ashamed,—and now you have spoiled it. It is cruel of you!’

‘Forgive me,’ he said, ‘or at any rate let me tell you why I came. Will you listen, or is my presence intolerable to you? Painful I know it must be, but can you bear it for a few minutes? I came here on your account, Cassandra. I had that to say which I thought might be for your happiness.’

‘It is too late to think of my happiness,’ she said bitterly. ‘You have Laura’s happiness to care for, not mine.’

‘I know that,’ he answered; ‘I am not unmindful of Laura’s happiness. But is that any reason why I should cease to care for yours? We agreed, I think, that it is impossible to forget.’

There was a hard tension in his manner that frightened her.

‘Maurice,’ she said, in low supplicating tones, ‘what do you want with me? What can be the use of such meetings as this? What happiness can come of them? I implore you to leave me. The past is past. The only course for us, that is not absolutely mad, is to let it alone for ever. Every word you say to me, every moment you remain here, makes my life more difficult, my position more shameful.’

She had withdrawn her hand from his when she began to speak, and she was standing now at a few paces from him. He made no effort to detain her, or even to lessen the distance between them. She half turned as if to go. Then she hesitated and stood still. If a gulf had opened in the earth to separate them she would have broken out in thanks,

but she could not of her own will go from him. A perceptible interval elapsed before he spoke again. Then he said,—

‘I have no right to resent any suspicion you may entertain with regard to me. I have behaved ill to you. I deserve that you should think me capable of anything.’

‘There is no use in this,’ she said; ‘what was it that you came to say?’

‘You give me leave to tell you?’

‘Yes, yes—only be quick.’

‘I will be quick, only let us sit down. Here in this open pathway we are liable to be seen from either end. Come under the trees.’

He spoke imperatively, and she felt constrained to obey. She followed him, hanging her head low in shame. To what depth had she fallen that she must skulk out of sight with Laura’s husband?

But she would not sit down. She

stood erect before him and once more begged him to speak quickly.

‘I have behaved ill to you,’ he repeated.

‘Yes, yes,’ she said, hardly knowing what she said. ‘But it is useless to talk of that now, if indeed it be not useless to talk at all.’

‘You gave me leave.’

‘I gave you leave—yes. Because you have made it a matter of indifference to me now what happens or what is said. Do you think I can go back among my friends after this meeting with you? Do you think I can look Laura in the face and not sink to the earth with shame at the memory of how her husband pursued me to remind me of what every thought of honour forbids me to think of? Do you expect to meet me to-night at Rachel’s? But after all I think I ought to thank you. You have decided everything. I have thought

a thousand times that the best thing I could do was to disappear. You have made it the *only* thing I can do. Yes, you have done the best thing for my happiness. Oh, Maurice, is this how men care for the women they love?'

'Cassandra,' he said in a voice of intense pain, 'I have no right to resent anything you may say. I only ask you for your own sake to listen. I do care for your happiness. If I did not, I should not be here now.'

'I will listen,' she said; 'only in mercy be quick.'

He drew nearer to her, and she did not move away. He took her hand again, and she let him lead her to the seat she had refused a minute ago. But he did not sit down beside her. He leaned against a tree at a little distance. She should not have occasion to start away from him again.

He went straight to the point.

‘I have suspected,’ he said, ‘what was passing in your mind. I have been haunted by the fear that some day we should lose sight of you. I have seen your trouble, and I knew you well enough to guess that, of the two ways out of it, the likeliest for you to choose was the most unselfish. You were not likely to stay where you thought your presence might bring sorrow. You were only too likely to take steps that would make all your future intolerable. You see I did you justice.’

‘More than justice,’ Cassandra said humbly. ‘I knew I ought to go, but I had not courage.’

‘You were right to stay.’

She shook her head.

‘Yes, you were right.’

‘It does not much matter,’ she said.

‘It is over now. You have ended it.’

‘No, it is not over, and I have not ended it.’

She had fixed her eyes on him for a moment with a dull stare. Now, her look went beyond him—away, through the trees, to a spot where a bit of the Serpentine gleamed in the sunlight. He followed her glance and felt confirmed in a suspicion that had been haunting him.

‘Cassandra,’ he said, ‘swear to me that you will never think of that again.’

‘It must end,’ she said.

‘For my sake, if not for your own, swear to me that you will give up that thought. Think of the unutterable agony that it would be to me to know that you had done that, and that I had brought you to it. I have behaved ill to you. I have been weak, contemptibly weak—I have hurt you. I know it, and I loathe myself for it—I know that I deserve punishment, but not such bitter

punishment as that. Cassandra, I will not bear that. Do you know that the thought of that water, and of you walking up and down by it alone and wretched, has been haunting me night and day? You said just now that this place had been a refuge for you full of good influences. I have been near you every evening since one day when I saw you linger on the bridge.'

'I was watching the setting sun,' said Cassandra. 'I never thought of the water. I am fond of life. It seems odd, does it not, after all that has happened? I wonder at it myself very often, but it is so. I cannot help it.'

'Oh, do not try,' he said in a full low tone that thrilled her with a sudden joy.

The words were very simple, but they breathed relief from a horror beyond words. They were a thanksgiving, a prayer, a revelation. As she looked up

for an instant and met his eyes, she knew that at last he loved her as she had desired to be loved by him. Their spirits had found their true relation: she was woman to him as he was man to her. Other men might wonder at her genius and wince under her judgments. He had done so before now: he would not do it again. He thought of her as weak and suffering—in mortal danger, needing the protection of his love—and all his manhood burned to serve and comfort her. He asked to take the burden of her life upon him. Nay, he had done so already. He had pursued her like a watchful Providence, making an atmosphere of rest in which she had walked confidently, not knowing to what influence she owed her peace.

And he was Laura's husband. . . .

She knew it, but not at once would she realise all that the fact involved. For

a moment she must resign herself to the bliss of being loved by him. She had walked lonely all her life till now: she would walk lonely for the rest of her days. But this oasis should yield its quickening draught ere she rose up and resumed her weary way. And so for one moment her heart rested in the forbidden joy, securely as though the dream might last for ever.

But the distance between them was undiminished, and quickly she awoke to the sad reality. His love had come too late: he owed it to another. He had no right to care for her. She must tell him so. She must rebuke him and turn away. Only she could not do it yet, for he had given her one instant of such joy as outweighed all the suffering his love had brought her. And the first thanks of her heart were for his love, the second only for the forbearance that saved it from being an insult.

There was a great gentleness in her voice when she spoke next.

‘And you have been here before,’ she said, ‘always—when I thought I was alone. But there was no danger. I never thought of the water. I am fond of life, oh, so fond of it! I think I love it for the sake of all that I have dreamed possible.’

‘You love it,’ said Herne, ‘for the sake of what you make it. That is what I wanted to put to you. You make life a nobler thing for all of us. We are better for having you. You have a right to the satisfaction of knowing that. The happiness it brings you is a pure and holy thing. You would be doing wrong in flying from it.’

‘I should be doing right in flying from you.’

‘You cannot fly from me and not fly from all your friends.’

‘Then I must fly from all my friends.’

‘*Why* must you? You have nothing to fear from me. Have I not told you that I have been here a dozen times at least, watching you while you walked up and down, till I know every tree in this grove by heart, and yet I have not troubled you? What can you have to fear from me? Am I such a low beast, Cassandra, that the woman I love and honour so that God! what can I say to make you know what I feel towards you? Is it conceivable that you are not safe with me when all I care for is your safety?’

‘It is not you, I fear; it is myself,’ she said.

‘And how can you best escape from yourself? By cutting yourself off from everything you care for in life,—from your own people, from society, from the work in which you delight,—and living somewhere out of sight, doing no one

knows what, among people who care nothing for you? The notion is insane, inhuman. You would be the first to say so if it were proposed for any one but yourself. Confess that such a life would be intolerable to you.'

She would not confess it, but she could not deny it. It was too terribly true.

He went on,—

'You see you cannot contradict me. Such an existence would be death to you, and you are fond of life. And the only alternative is to go on in the course you have wisely chosen.'

'It is a course full of danger,' she said.

'I swear to you that there shall be no danger.'

'But there is danger all the same.'

'Not more danger than is inseparable from any life that is worth having. To seek a life without danger is to ask to be a child again, or a stick, or a stone.

How many people here in London do you suppose are living a life without danger?—Not one man and hardly a woman. A handful of girls perhaps, and they the least alive of all the herd. You know this as well as I do.'

'You speak of outward danger. That is not what I fear. It is the feeling of guilt that I cannot be rid of. I am ashamed to look Laura in the face.'

'You are doing Laura no wrong.'

'Would she say so if she saw us now?'

He was silent for a few seconds.

Then he said, 'You are looking at the thing from an ideal standpoint and aiming at solutions that have become impossible. I have behaved ill. Things have gone wrong. They can never be wholly righted, but perhaps we may make them better. . . .'

Cassandra interrupted him.

'Things will be better when I am gone.'

‘By God, no!’ he cried with a violence that startled her. ‘Wrong is not righted by being made complete and infinite. That you should be utterly sacrificed, cannot be the right way of atonement.’

‘I am the only one who can go,’ she said. There was a helpless smile upon her face, in which he read the bitterness of despair and the irony of it.

‘Spare me that smile, Cassandra,’ he said; ‘its reproach kills me.’

‘I meant no reproach. I meant nothing beyond what I said—that I am the only one who can go, and that I had better go at once.’

‘But you must not go; believe me, you *need* not go. It ought to be possible for us to be friends. Any other supposition is a slander upon both of us—upon all that we have been to one another—all that we are.’

She shook her head, and again she

smiled the smile that was intolerable to him.

‘Do not smile like that. Listen to me—I could convince you if you would listen to me.’

‘I will listen,’ she said.

‘You will not misunderstand me if I seem to speak coldly,’ he said. ‘You will know that it is only because a common-sense tone is wisest and safest.’

‘Say what you like,’ she said, holding out her hand to him. ‘Oh, Maurice, you talk of reproach and forgiveness and of having behaved ill, and it all sounds meaningless to me. I could not reproach you if I would. If I could, everything would have been different. Say what you like, and . . . do what you will.’

He pressed her hand silently.

‘Tell me what is the common-sense view of the position,’ she said, feeling that he had still a difficulty in speaking.

He hesitated no longer, but said quietly,—

‘I think it is this. Laura is much happier for seeing you often at our house. She would be unhappy if you ceased to come. She would be absolutely miserable if she knew why you ceased to come. You are happier for coming. No one is injured by your presence. By ceasing to come you would be sacrificing yourself in vain.—Have you ever thought of what it might be to give up everything and then awake some day to find that the world was only the poorer for your loss? There is no remorse more terrible.’

‘I know it,’ groaned Cassandra; ‘it is hell!’

‘It is such a hell that you are preparing for yourself when you talk of disappearing from among us. It cannot be your duty to fly, when flight means

starvation for your own soul and misery for others.'

'It cannot be right to stay while I feel as I do towards you.'

'And will mere absence prevent our feeling as we do towards one another? If you disappeared from among us to-morrow, do you suppose that I should cease to think of you? I should not rest till I knew where you were, I should watch over you as I have done now, I would know day by day whether it was well with you. And you would think of me. We could not help it, either of us. If to care for one another is a sin, it is a sin we must carry with us to our graves. It is useless to say we must go here or go there because a feeling that has become part of our lives is sinful. We should take it with us, and only be sinners in one place instead of another.'

Cassandra looked up in sad reproach.

‘ Oh, why did not you think of all this before ? ’

‘ Because you were too great for me, and I was a fool and coward. ’

‘ I was a fool too,’ Cassandra said. ‘ But we will not reproach one another. ’

‘ It is sweeter to forgive,’ he said. ‘ You do forgive me ? ’ He waited a moment for her to answer, but she was silent. As she had said a moment ago, forgiveness from her to him had no meaning for her. She did not know how to forgive him. She only knew that she loved him and that she must not say so. He said again, ‘ You do forgive me, and you will let me make such poor atonement as is in my power—you will trust my friendship, Cassandra ? You will not any longer be afraid in my presence ? Henceforth I am your friend—your brother, and I have a right to care for my sister. Is it not so ? ’

He was standing close to her now, speaking low, waiting with trembling hope for her reply. She lifted her eyes to him for one moment; then she turned away her face and held out her hands to him without speaking. He took them in his and kissed them. She had surrendered, but she hardly acknowledged it to herself.

‘You promise me not to run away?’ he said. ‘You will stay among us and trust me—trust yourself?’

‘I will stay,’ she said.

‘And you will come to-night to Rachel’s?’

She bowed her head.

‘And I may see you home now?’

‘As you like.’

‘It is the simplest course,’ he said. ‘You trust me, and are not ashamed of being seen with me.’

She rose without another word, and

put her arm in his, and walked with him to the gate of the gardens. Further she would not let him go with her. She pleaded fatigue, and begged him to get her a cab.

At the moment of their parting it happened that Lady Walworth and Lady Mary Vane drove by. Maurice was raising his hat to Cassandra—she was bending slightly forward in acknowledgment. The cab went on, and he stood a moment looking after it.

‘There is Maurice Herne,’ said Rachel, nodding and waving her hand to him; ‘but he does not see us. He is absorbed in contemplation of a four-wheeled cab.’

‘Did you notice the lady in the cab?’ asked the other.

‘No; was she very beautiful? I will ask Maurice about her to-night.’

‘It was Cassandra,’ said Lady Mary; and her voice could not have been

more awful if she had said, 'It was the devil.'

'Cassandra—what then?' said Lady Walworth innocently.

But Lady Mary vouchsafed no answer.

Cassandra kept her promise and came to Arlington Street in the evening. The party was smaller than usual, and rather a dull one. She was importuned to sing, but she persistently refused.

'Take care,' said Lady Walworth; 'one may give oneself airs too soon. It will be time for you to be capricious after the 28th. Now, you must be all amiable condescension. Do sing. Everybody is bored.'

'I would if I could,' said Cassandra; 'but I am not well—my head is splitting. I should have been wiser not to come.'

'Poor thing! You have been overworking yourself, and forgetting to eat and drink, I daresay. I declare, women,

when they live by themselves, are even more helpless than men. You look starved—I will wager you have had no dinner to-night.'

Cassandra smiled confirmation. It was true that she had had no dinner—she had felt no inclination for food on coming in. She said she had over-tired herself, and that the best thing she could do now was to go home to bed.

'Not till you have had some food,' said Rachel. 'You do not leave my house without supper. I shall send you down with Maurice Herne and instruct him to feed you like a baby—here he is.'

Herne was passing close by them. He was making his way towards Laura, who was sitting by Lady Mary on a sofa in the back room. She had expressed a wish to go early, and he thought she would probably be ready to leave now.

He had carefully avoided Cassandra throughout the evening, only speaking the word or two, on coming in, which it would have been significant to omit. He pretended now not to observe her, though he was so near her that he had difficulty in not treading on her gown as he threaded his way through the group of which she made one.

Lady Walworth laid her hand on his arm and stopped him.

‘I was just looking for you,’ she said. ‘Cassandra is starving, and I want you to take her down to get some food.’

‘Can I do anything for you?’ he asked, speaking direct to Cassandra.

‘Don’t consult her,’ said Lady Walworth; ‘she is under my orders and so are you. You must take her down and give her champagne and chicken. She has been working hard and forgetting to eat; and she will be laid up in a day or

two if she is not taken in hand. Take her down and make her eat.'

'What am I to do?' said Herne, still speaking to Cassandra.

He would not offer her his arm without her permission—she should have free opportunity of reconsidering her promise of the afternoon. She understood him, and determined to be equally honourable; she had promised to trust him, and she would not go back from her word. She answered,—

'I think we must do what we are told. I believe Rachel is right—chicken and champagne are a good foundation for success.'

They went down together, and she let him go through the form of getting refreshments for her. But she could not eat them. Her headache was genuine, and he forbore to persecute her.

‘ You would rather I got you a cab than anything else ? ’ he said.

‘ Thank you, yes. I am very tired— you must tell Rachel that I supped heartily and then thought myself free to go.’

He found her cloak and helped her to escape. As he was going upstairs, he was caught by Lord Walworth, who detained him for some minutes. The delay was annoying ; he thought Laura might be getting impatient ; it was later than she had meant to stay. He broke away as soon as he could, and hurried to the drawing-room, made a short explanation to Rachel, and then went in search of his wife. She was still on the sofa looking pale and tired. Her face seemed to reproach him, but he could not tell whether its reproach was intentional. Her words, when he reached her, showed that it was. She said,—

‘I thought we were going early ; it is half-past eleven, and I am so tired.’

‘I was coming to you half-an-hour ago,’ he answered, ‘but Rachel intercepted me and ordered me to take Cassandra down to supper. She was ill, and I had to get her a cab and then explain to Rachel that she was gone. Then Walworth got hold of me and I could not escape. But we will go now at once. Mary will say good-night to Rachel for us—will you not?’ he said, turning to his sister-in-law.

‘Certainly,’ answered Lady Mary in chilling tones ; ‘Laura ought to go at once. I was just thinking of taking her home myself.’

Herne answered drily, ‘It was very kind of you, but hardly necessary. There are at least twenty men here who would have fetched me if Laura had asked them to do so—I think Laura knew that. Shall

we come now, or would you like to say good-night to anybody?'

He turned from Lady Mary and addressed Laura herself, as if deprecating interference between them.

Laura chose to go at once. She had felt guilty during the dialogue between her husband and her sister. Lady Mary had drawn her attention to the little scene in the doorway when Herne was hindered by Rachel from coming to fetch her away. She had said, 'Do you see?' in a manner that had made Laura start; and the half-hour since had been full of miserable suspicions that had made it the longest of her life.

Now she was repentant towards her husband, and she wished her sister a frigid good-night.



CHAPTER V.

‘ We pass sentence upon our fellows, of failure or of success, as if we knew what their aspiration had been.’

THREE days before the reading in Arlington Street—that is to say on the 25th of July—there was to be a grand rehearsal at the Hernes’. For this Laura had stipulated when the idea of readings was first started; and at the same time she had made Cassandra promise to come and stay with her during the important week. The 25th was a Tuesday—Cassandra’s classes broke up on the preceding Saturday, and she arrived in Chester Place on Monday.

Laura's welcome was languidly affectionate. She said many times that she was glad to see Cassandra, but having said this, she seemed to have little more to say. They fell into an awkward silence, and, to break it, she took Cassandra to the spare-room, told her she was its first inhabitant, and showed her all the arrangements she had made for her comfort. Cassandra praised everything and was a little more grateful than the occasion required. Then Laura bethought her that Cassandra must be tired, and suggested that she should lie down and rest till it was time to dress for dinner; which Cassandra was glad enough to do, not so much because she was tired as because of the embarrassment Laura's presence occasioned her.

They had been together a very few days before and had chatted easily

enough, and Cassandra was not conscious of anything she had done since that could have caused a sudden change of feeling in Laura. She had not once seen Maurice alone since the day of their meeting in Kensington Gardens; they never corresponded; and it happened that, during the last few days, they had not even met in society. She tried to persuade herself that there was no change, but the more she dwelt on the manner of her reception, the more she felt that she was not so welcome as Laura professed to make her. Then she tried to persuade herself that there was, at any rate, no justification for a change. She repeated to herself the assurances she had fought against when Maurice had urged them upon her: she had come to think them sound. All had gone so smoothly that she had learned to look upon the danger, of

which she had talked, as past, and to thank Maurice for the frank speech to which they owed their present safe relations. She had had no reason to repent of her trust in him. In all their intercourse since, he had been honourably true to his promise—sparing her every possible occasion of embarrassment.

She was deeply grateful to him, and said to herself many times what a blessed gift was this male common-sense that she had sometimes looked down on with contempt. Left to herself, she would probably have taken some mad step that would have betrayed her and him, and ruined Laura's chance of happiness. Thanks to him, they were tiding safely over the time of greatest difficulty for them all. In a few weeks London would be emptying. She would go home for a short holiday. Herne and Laura would stay on in town till the end

of August, and then go down to Ardwen. When they met again in October, Laura would be a mother, and a new chapter of existence would have begun for her. Cassandra could be less frequent in her visits without being missed. The child would furnish Laura with interest and occupation. She would moreover be in better health and less liable to the morbid moods she had been a prey to during this summer.

She repeated all these things to herself as she walked up and down Laura's spare bedroom, and tried to find comfort in them. But all force of conviction had gone from them, and once more she felt that truth and right were on the side of the unreasoning instinct that bade her fly from Laura's husband. Not that she wavered from her trust—only, as she had said to him, she feared herself and the sense of

guilt that overwhelmed her in Laura's presence. She said to herself that for a woman to feel guilty is to be guilty. Acquittal of her reason and the unanimous absolution of all the world are as nothing against the condemnation of her inner conscience. Maurice had decided as a man, and was doubtless right from a man's point of view. For her he was mistaken, and she had been wrong to let him rule her. But it was too late to go back—she must make the best of her position and learn to bear her own disapprobation.

It had been arranged that they should all dine that evening in Arlington Street. There was to be a family party: the Tremadoes, who had come to town a few days before in order to be present at her readings; Lord Rhoads, whom the same attraction had brought from Paris; Mr. and Mrs. Cour-

tenay, with the pretty Eva, whom I hope the reader has not quite forgotten, and Egmont, to whom she had recently become engaged; Mr. Burrell Jones—without his wife, who was nursing babies at home with whooping cough; Lady Mary Vane, and our old friend Mr. Fenton. Cassandra and the bride-elect shared the honours of the evening. Eva Courtenay was taken down to dinner by Lord Walworth, and sat silent between him and Mr. Tremadoc; Cassandra went down with Mr. Burrell Jones, whose place was next to their hostess, and was the centre of conversation throughout dinner. She was brilliant, and said things that were quoted afterwards. She found the party pleasant, and forgot, for a space, all the anxieties that had beset her. After dinner Fenton taxed her with being cynical. She denied the charge, and

then expressed penitence if she had sinned unknowingly.

‘It is a mistake in art,’ he said.

‘I agree with you, only how is it to be avoided? There are combinations in society that induce cynicism as surely as certain climates do malaria.’

‘True, and for that reason art should eschew society.’

‘Is that why we see you so seldom?’

‘It is. I have the disease so strongly that I dare not risk aggravating it.’

‘Then what a touching compliment you pay us by being here to-night!’

‘I pay *you* one.’

Cassandra made a magnificent curtsey, and her lip curled more cynically than ever.

‘You think I am not in earnest,’ he said.

‘I know you *are*,’ she answered. ‘But I have not mastered my part of *ingénue*. It is Eva Courtenay you should have

complimented—not me. Only perhaps it is better to leave Egmont to do that. Tell me what is the greatest age you have ever known simplicity attain.'

'I believe Lady Sarah is six-and-thirty,' he answered.

Cassandra laughed and said, 'And Rachel is a year older.'

'But that is hardly to the point,' said Fenton. 'Now if you had mentioned her husband's age . . .'

'I do not know it,' Cassandra said.

'I do,' said Fenton, 'I heard it from Burrell Jones the other day.'

'And it is?'

'The age of innocence.'

'Who is cynical now, Mr. Fenton?' asked Cassandra, laughing in spite of herself.

'All the world, and you and I who are part of it. But if you will sing something, we shall all feel better.'

‘Is that true?’

‘Yes, perfectly true, and you only doubt it because it is so. I will make atonement for the wicked things I have said by giving you a sermon—that is, if you will have it.’

‘I am much in want of sermons.’

‘Then believe me when I tell you that to be great in any way is of necessity to say good-bye to the feeling of innocence, and that to be great is a duty wherever it is possible. If you did not see the world as it is, you would not know what it ought to be. Innocence cannot paint innocence, cannot even conceive it. Look at Miss Courtenay, for instance; she is the most guileless of all present, and yet she blushes guiltily every time Egmont speaks to her. Any one of us could act the *ingénue* better than she can.’

‘And what is the drift of all this?’

‘Ah, I had forgotten that I was

preaching. I must point my moral. I think it is that women who have great gifts must not take fright at the consequences their gifts bring with them. They must not cry for the simplicity of bread and milk—they must rise to a higher simplicity of strong meat.'

'A simplicity above cynicism, not below it,' said Cassandra.

'Exactly, and the sum of it is that you must not grow cynical, or you will fail and disappoint us all. Now will you give me a song in return for my sermon?'

'I promised to sing a duet with Mr. Burrell Jones.'

'Pardon me, but I do not like the combination.'

'It must be, nevertheless,' said Cassandra, 'and here he comes to remind me.'

The duet was much applauded. Mr. Burrell Jones had a fine baritone, and

people said it went particularly well with Cassandra's soprano, the only dissentient voices being Mr. Fenton's and Lady Mary's. The former repeated that he did not like the combination, and Lady Mary said she agreed with him. They were pressed to sing again, but Cassandra knew Laura wished to go early, and she would not risk detaining her.

She thought over Fenton's remarks on her way home, and wondered how far he divined her position and how far he had been merely shooting at random. Either way it was clear that he too thought it was a mistake to fly. But then he was only another man. He had suggested another line of argument—one drawn from comparison. Maurice had asked her how many people in London lived a life without danger. She asked herself now how many husbands among her acquaintance loved their wives best,

how many wives their husbands? At the worst, was she not less guilty than many others who held their heads high and whose names were untouched by scandal? Only again, what did that matter, if her own instinct condemned her?

She argued the question over and over all through the next day, but without arriving at any conclusion in which her mind could rest. And she was still arguing it when the evening came and she found herself at last in presence of her audience.

Herne led her to her place, and stayed by her for a moment, arranging her desk and making sure that all was right. She thanked him, but said she should not use the desk—she knew the play from beginning to end, it was easier to her to recite than to read. Then he left her and took a place near the doorway

where he could see her without being fully in her sight.

She came forward and stood face to face with the audience.

There had been much discussion about what dress she should wear. Lady Walworth had had wonderful ideas: she had wanted her to appear as the tragic muse, she had designed a symbolic costume that was to express the ideas of the poem; a thousand times she had implored Cassandra to allow her to provide the dress and trust all its arrangements to her taste. But Cassandra had been deaf to all suggestions, and had reserved the right of putting on what she pleased at the last moment.

And what she did please at the last moment, was to appear in a black gown of lustreless texture and the simplest possible form. Her hair was without ornaments, and the sombre effect of the

dress was relieved only by her own vivid colouring and the glimmer of a jewel she wore on her neck.

The dress was one that she had worn many times before, and her choice of it this evening was dictated solely by a disinclination to trouble herself about the matter. To appear at all before an audience of Laura's friends had become so distasteful to her that she could not trick herself out for the occasion.

But the most careful study could not have produced a more perfect result. She looked magnificent, and candid Lady Walworth said to her neighbour, 'She was right; the plain black gown is splendid. It is consummately chosen.'

That she was splendid was the unanimous feeling of the room, and a movement of applause, greeting her advance, sent a thrill of delicious ex-

citement through all her nerves. She bowed in acknowledgment; the applause spread, and its effect upon herself was heightened.

All her senses seemed quickened as by an electric bath. She drew herself up and surveyed the audience, and for a moment she felt that she had been transported into a palace of truth.

I know not whether it was that her studies under Mr. Williamson had made her abnormally quick in reading the expression of faces and spelling language on the lips, or whether what she saw and heard was but the effect of an over-strained imagination, but in that instant it seemed to her that she had the clue to all the secrets of the people who were ranged before her. She could see their most hidden feelings, hear their inaudible speech. She saw Lady Mary touch Rhoss on the arm and say,

‘Look at Laura and tell me if it can be justified.’ She heard him answer, ‘There are guiltier women than she who will judge her by-and-by.’ And she followed his eye along the benches. She saw a bride of ten weeks’ standing casting down her eyes with guilty consciousness while her neighbour said soft words in her ear. She saw

But what right have I to tell the things Cassandra saw or thought she saw in that strange moment? Enough, that, as she looked, her lip curled with scorn and the words she had spoken to Fenton came back upon her mind,—*There are combinations in society that make cynicism inevitable.*

Then she looked at Laura and read her condemnation in her white face and anxious eyes, and the guilt of others seemed as nothing—her own was all she knew. For a moment she thought she

would not read, but Egmont, who was standing near, said low,—

‘You had better begin at once—they are all quiet.’

She made a great effort, and began. At first her voice was low, and more than once it faltered with emotion that had its source outside the play. But gradually she mastered her feelings and compelled them to obey the rhythm of the verse. Her passion helped the passion of the poem. Her audience was at her feet; and when she came to the great scene where Faust demands of the fiend, who will not understand him, that he may drink to the dregs the mixed cup of human experience—tasting hatred as well as love, agony no less than rapture, vileness side by side with glory, and death at last when life has been exhausted,—when she put the despairing question, *What then is man if he may*

not reach the crown of manhood towards which all his being strives?—and paused a moment before uttering the mocking answer, a burst of applause told her that success was sure.

From that moment she forgot everything but the play. She was Faust, she was Mephistopheles, she was Gretchen. Herself she had ceased to be.

She was unconscious of the unswerving gaze of passionate admiration with which Herne's eyes were fixed on her. She did not see the haggard misery in Laura's eyes as they looked helplessly from her face to his, and read the truth at last. She saw nothing, and she felt the applause that followed the close of every scene only as an inspiration for the next.

But it had been arranged that there should be a break half-way through

the reading, and during the pause consciousness of her surroundings came back to her.

All the audience had risen. The room was filled with a buzz of voices. Women were drying their eyes and saying they had never known what *Faust* was before. Men were pressing round Laura and begging to be introduced to her cousin. Laura was forcing her lips to smile, but the expression of her eyes gave them ghastly contradiction. Suddenly she turned deadly pale and made a tottering movement in the direction of the door. Cassandra darted towards her and put her arm out to support her. But Laura looked at her stonily and pushed her away. Lady Mary stepped between them, and at the same moment Rhoo came up and made Laura lean on him.

'This is your doing,' he said; and he

glared at Lady Mary with an oath between his teeth.

‘No, it is mine,’ said Cassandra; and she turned away from the group, and passed out on to the balcony, and stood alone in the moonlight.

Had all the room seen the mute gesture of repulsion with which Laura had rejected her proffered help? Had they understood its meaning? Would they turn away from her if she went back among them now?—But she would not go back. She would stay outside alone till they were all gone. Then she would creep upstairs to bed, and to-morrow, before breakfast, she would go away.

Cassandra had lived over thirty years in the world; she had a woman’s experience of its difficulties, more than most women’s knowledge of its facts, and she was generally credited with possessing her full share of presence of mind in

social emergencies. But there were moments when she was helpless as a child, and had no thought but to lie still while things took their course and carried her with them to destruction or salvation. It was such a moment with her now. Her good name hung on her immediate action, and she was passively resolved that she would not act.

In a few minutes Herne joined her.

‘Oh, there you are,’ he said, forcing himself to speak without embarrassment, and succeeding so well that she thought his composure genuine. ‘Everybody is asking for you. Why have you hidden yourself? Let me take you back into the drawing-room.’

He tried to take her hand and lead her back, but she drew it away and stood firm.

‘How is Laura?’ was all she said.

‘Laura will be down in a few minutes.

The heat of the room made her faint. I have taken her upstairs. Sarah is nursing her, and she will be all right very soon. When I have taken you back, I will go up to her again.'

'Go now,' said Cassandra; 'I do not want to go back to the drawing-room. It is cooler here, and I feel a little less wicked.'

'Cassandra,' he said, 'I implore you to come back. People are beginning to talk.'

'Let them talk,' she answered; 'their talk can alter nothing. I thought we were doing right, injuring nobody. That was what you assured me. How have things changed that now we must fear the talk of people like——?'

'Hush,' he said; 'you are unreasonable. We cannot argue now. You promised to trust me. This is the moment to show that you meant it. Come back now and finish your reading, and all

that has happened will be forgotten. You have had a splendid triumph.'

'A triumph!' she said with an accent of scorn. 'Is this your idea of a triumph? I think I could write another canto to the Inferno and show how usurpers are crushed under the wheels of their own chariots—*of triumph*. Maurice, whatever happens, I cannot go back to that room.'

'What excuse am I to make for you?'

'What you can.'

'There is nothing that I can say. You *must* come back.'

'Why *must* I come? To prevent the world's talking? Oh, Maurice, I think men are greater cowards than women. I am ready to bear my punishment, but you cannot meet yours.'

'It is not a question of bearing punishment. It is a question of preventing

further wrong. For Laura's sake you ought to come back.'

'You own then that we have wronged her. You saw her face, you saw how she pushed me away,—can I go back after that? She hates me, and I loved her—oh, Maurice, I did love her—she must never doubt that . . .'

'I know you did,' he said. 'It is I who have wronged her, not you, Cassandra. I have wronged you both. You cannot say it more strongly than I say it to myself. But this is not the time for confession. To-morrow will come. To-night, for your sake and for hers, I must entreat you to come back.'

'I will come back when Laura asks me.'

'Maurice dear' Laura was standing on the window-sill. She had come down, and the room being hot, some one had placed a chair for her near the

window. From where it stood, she could see Maurice but not Cassandra. She rose to go to him: she wanted to tell him she was better and to reassure herself of his love by a few words alone with him. But a step forward brought her in view of them both. Cassandra was leaning against the wall that divided the balcony from that of the neighbouring house—the moonlight fell on her face and lit up its beauty—Maurice stood in front of her pleading desperately. It was as if a vision had been sent to end the weary argument Laura had been holding within herself. That other scene in the library at Ardgwen came back to her; she understood its meaning now; she remembered Mary's hints; she no longer doubted her own vague instinct of distrust. A long drama of treachery was laid bare at last. Her husband and her nearest friend had conspired to make

her miserable. She turned sick at heart, and broke off in her appeal.

Cassandra started forward as if she would have thrown herself at Laura's feet. But Herne laid a strong hand upon her arm, and pressed her back against the wall.

'This is no time for a scene,' he said. 'We must go back to our guests. Laura must wait till they are gone for an explanation.'

'I will go to bed,' said Laura; 'I am ill, but I will not disturb everybody. Sarah will go upstairs with me.'

Sarah took her upstairs, and Cassandra came back into the drawing-room followed by Maurice. People had taken their places again and were waiting for the reading to go on.

'I am not going to read,' Cassandra said to Maurice.

'No,' he said; 'it is impossible now.'

He beckoned to Rhoos, and asked him to explain that Laura had been taken ill and that the reading could not go on. Then he went upstairs.

Rhoos made the announcement, and everybody began to say good-night. A few guests went at once; others were obliged to wait for their carriages.

At last they were almost all gone, and Maurice came down and reported that Laura was asleep. A doctor had been sent for and had declared that there was nothing serious—she would be herself again in the morning. He stood talking to the few guests who still lingered.

Cassandra and Rhoos found themselves *tête-à-tête* in the back room.

‘How much longer are you going to stay here?’ he asked.

‘Not after to-morrow morning.’

‘Forgive me, if I say that I am glad to hear it.’

‘You need not ask my forgiveness,’ she said. ‘It is I who ought to kneel to every one. I wish I might—I think I should feel better for it.’

She tapped her foot impatiently on the floor. All the emotions of the evening were turning to a miserable irritation for which no vent was possible.

Rhoos asked her what she meant to do when she went from there.

‘I do not know and I do not care. I am going for ever. None of you will hear of me any more. That is all that matters.’

Rhoos almost smiled. There was a wildness about the idea that touched absurdity.

He said, ‘Do you mean that you are going to live quite by yourself—away from all your friends?’

‘It is the only way I can live. Among my friends, I make misery. The desert

is the right place for me, and I am going into it at last.'

'I know there is no use in my giving you advice,' he began; but she interrupted him.

'Don't say that,' she said; 'I want advice. I am bewildered and utterly astray. What ought I to do?'

She looked up at him beseechingly, with clasped hands and eyes full of despair.

'Come into the balcony,' he said quietly, 'and if I can I will help you.'

She rose to follow him through the window. Then suddenly drawing back, she said with a bitter laugh,—

'Oh heavens! what must you think of me?'

'I think you are in great trouble and that it is very kind of you to let me help you. You need not fear my misunderstanding you, Cassandra. I see quite

well how you are placed, and that the judgment of a dispassionate person like myself is just what you want.'

'Thank you,' she said very humbly ; 'you have always been much kinder to me than I deserved.'

'You have nothing to thank me for. Will you not sit down? we could talk more quietly so.'

He pointed to a chair and seated himself in one beside it. She sat down and began to speak hurriedly.

'You see what has happened,' she said. 'We have played a mad game, and it has ended disastrously. But we meant no wrong. We persuaded ourselves that our friendship robbed her of nothing. It was mad, and it has ended as it must end. But we meant no wrong, —do you understand?'

'I understand perfectly. The children of light have once more proved them-

selves less wise in their generation than the children of this world.'

'Yes, that is it,' said Cassandra. 'And now I want you to advise me. Of course I must go to-morrow, and I must go without seeing Laura. Shall I write and tell her how it all happened?'

'Certainly not.'

'I knew you would say so. What shall I do then?'

'Invent an excuse for going suddenly, and write that.'

'I *cannot*.'

'Then go without writing at all.'

'And leave her to think the worst?'

'Leave her to think what she likes.'

Cassandra gave a groan.

'Oh, it is hard,' she said. 'I know I am to blame. But yet, as I look back, I cannot but see that I was terribly tempted and that there were excuses. I should forgive in her place, if all the truth were

told me. It is terribly hard to leave her without one word that would make her understand. And yet I believe that you are right.'

'I know I am. Your mistake was to come here at all. The only reparation you can make is to go away and leave Laura and her husband to one another. They must settle it between them.'

'She will think the very worst of me. Do you not know that she will?'

'I know nothing in the matter.'

'But you can think—what do you think?'

'I think as you do, that it is possible Laura may blame you more than you deserve, but——'

He was going to say something to the effect that that would be easy, seeing that in his opinion Cassandra had been throughout more sinned against than sinning. But he forbore, knowing that

to suggest excuses for her, would only make her break out in exaggerated self-condemnation that would be profitless.

Cassandra put her own interpretation on the blank he left.

‘But I must bear it as my punishment you mean?’

‘No, indeed. I did not mean to speak as your judge, but merely to repeat that whatever explanation is made to Laura must come from her husband, not from you. And, after all, Maurice is not likely to make a scapegoat of you.’

Cassandra did not answer for a few moments. It needed a painful effort of her will to submit to this duty of silence. But she recognised that it was the right course and she was resolved to adopt it. In asking counsel of Rhoos, she had honestly meant to be guided by what he should say—she would not reject his advice because it involved pain.

‘I promise you,’ she said, ‘that I will go early without seeking an explanation. And now good-night, my friend.’

She laid a peculiar emphasis on the word friend which Rhoss contrived to reproduce in his answer. He said,—

‘Before we say good-night you must tell me what part of the desert you are going to,—you cannot mind leaving your address with your “friends.”’

‘I shall go back to my lodgings,’ she said, and she told him her number in Wimpole Street.

‘Will you promise me to take no decisive step till you have heard from me? You should not act rashly. Remember that your friends have claims upon you which you are not justified in disregarding. Your mother——.’

‘I will do nothing without first telling you,—I mean, nothing immediately. I cannot bind myself for always.’

‘That is of course. But just now you are upset and unfit for judgment.’

She bent her head in assent, and then parted from him with a silent pressure of the hand. She saw Maurice waiting alone at the other end of the drawing-room as if to give her the opportunity of speech if she desired it, but she avoided him and went straight upstairs to her room.

In a few minutes she heard the house door close and she knew that Rhoss was gone. Then Maurice’s footstep sounded up the stairs, and she felt every fall of it like a throb of her own pulses. She knew when he stopped outside Laura’s room, she held her breath during the pause between the click that opened the door and the duller thud that told of its closing again, then she buried her face in her hands and thought, ‘Now they are together once more, and

I am shut out for ever from their lives.'

So near and yet so far. Only a few beams and a little plaster,—only heaven, earth, and hell, between her and the two beings who were dearest to her in the world.

She rose from the chair into which she had sunk on first coming into the room, and busied herself with undressing and packing, moving stealthily for fear she should be heard in the room below. Since she had promised to forego the luxury of an explanation, she could not bear that they should know of her departure till it was an accomplished fact. It would have been intolerable to her to see either of them again and hold silence ; intolerable to be asked about her plans or offered help in the details of her departure. There is a sting in the touch of hands we have once held in fulness of soul's sym-

pathy, when such sympathy has become impossible, and they offer themselves in services of practical help.

So she moved noiselessly about the room, not caring how long her task occupied her, wishing rather that it might drag on till the morning. But at last it was accomplished, and by the time the morning dawned she had no excuse for watching any longer. But she would not go to bed, not believing it possible that she could sleep. She sat down in the window seat and rested her head upon the sill so that she could watch the morning grow.

But Nature, though she is a hard mother to us at times, is not without her mercies, and among them there is perhaps none greater than the physical exhaustion that follows on mental strain, and brings us rest when we need it most and are yet ashamed to seek it. And

in spite of her sorrow and her pride, sleep came to Cassandra before she had watched many minutes—sleep, sweet and dreamless as that of an infant in its mother's lap.



CHAPTER VI.

‘ The fruit of dreamy hoping
Is, waking, blank despair.’

AS soon as the arrival of the first post made the excuse of a sudden summons plausible, Cassandra asked for breakfast in her room, and told the housemaid that she was obliged to go away at once. She left a message for Laura to the effect that the Annesleys were in trouble and had begged her to lose no time in going to them, and then saying that she would write in the course of the day, she hurried from the door. To go really to the Annesleys was, in truth, the last thing she felt inclined to do. Theirs was a busy prac-

tical house in which all questions had been settled long ago on grounds of pure reason, and all that remained was to act upon them. Her relations with them were based on the least fundamental part of her nature, and were in fact those of comradeship rather than of friendship; all that they had in common belonged to the region of opinion and action, and left the depths of emotion unsounded.

And just now emotion was paramount with Cassandra. The balance of things was upset with her, and that end of the beam that carries the practical counterweights of passion had jerked its burden to the winds and pointed emptily aloft, while emotion bore down the other end to depths that reason cannot measure.

She had promised Rhoss not to act on her own wild impulses, and she was content to sit still until he told her what to do, but she could not go among people

whose philosophy ignored the difficulties in which she was involved. The conversation in Brunswick Square would have been about as grateful to her present mood as one can fancy a dry reading of the Decalogue might be to a conscience broken with the guilt of every act therein proscribed. Besides it would have been impossible to explain to them the reasons of her sudden breach with the Hernes, and she would have felt dishonest in accepting their hospitality without a candid statement of her position.

She could not go to the Annesleys, but a summons from them was the only excuse she could invent for her sudden departure, and she must trust to Rhoss to help her out of any awkwardness the fiction might involve.

Meanwhile she went back to Wimpole Street and waited idly in her room with her own sad thoughts for company.

About an hour after her arrival a letter from Rhoos was brought to her. It was a welcome interruption to her solitude. She broke the seal however with some tremor. There were considerations that made her sometimes doubt the prudence of allowing him to become her sole adviser. But as she read, she felt reassured. It was a letter of purest friendship.

‘MY DEAR CASSANDRA,—There is an aspect of your position which I consider very important and which I only forbore^{*} to draw your attention to last night because I knew that to do so would be useless. But I have more hope of gaining a hearing this morning—much more hope of persuading you by letter than in the course of a verbal argument. This is my apology for attacking you again so soon.

‘What I want to convince you of, is that you are taking a very exaggerated view of your mistake—for after all you have only made a mistake. To talk of yourself as a guilty woman who ought to ask forgiveness of all the world and then disappear into the desert, sounds like nonsense to anybody who knows you and knows the world. If you deserve excommunication, the whole of fashionable London, and I daresay unfashionable London too, ought to have been laid under an interdict long ago. Your turn for going into the desert will not fairly come till the desert is fuller than the world of which you think yourself unworthy. I speak, mind you, of your position and conduct as compared to the conduct and position of other women in society. In comparison with many whom I am in no haste to condemn, I do not hesitate to say that you are

blameless. But I pray you to understand that in saying this I do not for a moment presume to come between you and your conscience. While it condemns you, I do not venture to acquit you. A mistake that has brought distress on others is, I well know, a thing to be repented perhaps even more bitterly than many false steps that the world calls by its hardest names. But such repentance is a matter between you and your own soul. It must not clothe itself in outward acts of humiliation, or it will infallibly be misunderstood.

‘If you now commit yourself to any signal step of retreat, the world will call you guilty in its own sense, and it will be your fault that it does so. You will have given occasion to a scandal from which you will never again be clear. And this you have no right to do. Your disgrace would touch your family. If

you were really guilty it would be necessary for them to accept a share of your shame. But you are not guilty, and to thrust an unreal shame upon yourself and them would be not only foolish but wrong.

‘I cannot pretend to think that the scene last night escaped observation. It has set people talking, but the talkers know that they have themselves been talked of in their time, and they will not be very severe on you unless you condemn yourself by seeming guilty. My sisters of course see the whole situation, and I wish there were any one of them to whom I could advise you to speak freely. But in truth I think you will do better to avoid the subject with all of them. From Mary you would not expect much comfort—I need not warn you against making *her* your confessor. Sarah’s extreme simplicity would make her about as helpful as a child of two

years old. Rachel would probably scare you by taking a lighter view of the matter than even I have dared to suggest. Confess to none of them, but accept frankly the support of the two who are willing to stand by you. You will do this with a clearer conscience for knowing that you are not accepting it on false pretences. And so I say again, they know how you stand, and are not disposed to cast you off. For you to take the initiative and cast them off, would be simply suicide.

‘ I am going now to Chester Place, and shall send you news of Laura as soon as I have seen her. In the meanwhile, will you go and see Rachel, who expects you to call about some arrangements for Friday evening? I have just seen her and know this from herself.

‘ Forgive me for inflicting upon you this long lesson in worldly wisdom, and believe

me to be always and under all circumstances,

‘ Affectionately yours,

‘ RHOOS.’

She read the letter through several times, and at every reading felt more convinced that its counsels were wise. The moment for retreat was past. She had drifted into danger when she might have held aloof, and now that she would fain have returned to safety, right and wrong had changed places, and the temptation of yesterday was the binding duty of to-day. She owed it to others to persevere in the course upon which she had entered. She must give the reading on Friday, she must play her part in society as before. She could do it, and she would.

She wrote a short note of thanks to Rhooos, and then lost no time in going

to Arlington Street to keep her engagement with Lady Walworth.

And meanwhile how had the night gone with Laura ?

While Rhoos and Cassandra discussed in the balcony, and Herne waited in the drawing-room, she lay sleepless and miserable on her bed, straining her ear to catch the voices from below—now wishing them to stop and let her husband come and make the explanation he had spoken of, now wishing that they might never cease and so postpone for ever the moment in which she was to hear the extent to which she had been wronged.

What ought she to say to him when he came ? Must she reproach him and repel him with stern looks ? It seemed to her that she ought to do so. He had deceived her at all points ; he had forfeited for ever all claim upon her love. She had learned to love him by

believing him to be great and good and worthy to be loved. He had been her hero and her god, and she had gloried in giving herself to him without reserve; and he had shown himself unworthy—not only faithless to herself but untrue to all the purposes of his life. It seemed to her that the very purity of the love she had given him commanded her to take it back now that he had stripped himself of all the qualities that had won it from her. And she realised with a sort of horror that she could not.

Was it right or was it wrong? She could not say: her judgment was chained in helpless bondage to her love. If he would but come back to her she would love him wholly as before, only no longer blindly for virtues not his own, but madly for himself because she could not do otherwise.

And all the while he had not cared for

her, but for Cassandra. But why then had he married her? Was he a fiend, that he should find pleasure in ruining the happiness of one who had never done him any wrong?

And then her mind went back to the days before her marriage when she was unthinkingly happy with her own people, when she loved God and believed the world was good. He had spoiled all her life, and yet she could not hate him. She knew that if he came to her she should find no words of reproach, but yearn to throw her arms about his neck and sob forgiveness on his breast. But this she must not do, because he did not want her love—and besides, he would not come. He and Cassandra would go away together and leave her alone. She had heard of such things being done, and in the sudden wreck of all her habits of thought and feeling, the worst possibili-

ties seemed the only probable events. Maurice and Cassandra would go away together. She found herself looking to this as the certain sequel of to-night's discovery. But then would they go secretly, or would he come and tell her they were going? Perhaps that was what he meant by an explanation. He would come to her bedside and say that he had found it impossible to go on loving her, and then he would kiss her and say good-bye, and it would all be over. Every moment she became more certain that it would happen so. But what would be her part in the scene? Surely she would not oppose him; there would be no happiness in holding him against his will. Only how would it be possible to kiss him, knowing that it was for the last time—how should she ever let loose the hands that had grown so dear?

All at once the door opened, and she

knew that he was standing within the room. On a sudden impulse, she feigned sleep. He came near to the bed, and she felt him bending over her. She longed to look up, to speak, to embrace him. But there was a spell of terror on her that only his voice could loosen, and he did not speak. He stood doubting whether to waken her and ask her forgiveness then and there, or to leave her sleeping till the morning. The doctor had said she must sleep, and her white face resting on the pillow looked at peace.

He scrupled to disturb her. He was unwilling to delay their reconciliation.

While he still hesitated, she turned over on her side and flung her arm across her face as a screen against the oppression of his silent presence.

‘She turns away from me,’ he thought, and he went out of the room and closed

the door noiselessly behind him for fear of waking her.

Yes, he was gone, and she was alone for ever. For a few minutes she lay quite still trying to realise her future. She saw herself getting up next day and going about explaining to the servants in the house, to her friends, to her mother and sisters and brothers, that her husband had ceased to care for her and had gone away and left her. She saw the lonely years following one another in monotonous succession,—comfortless, joyless, blank. But saddest of all in the sad outlook, was the sense that that which had been hitherto her sweetest hope had now become her bitterest terror. Through the disappointments of her year of married life, there had been one thought in which she had never failed to find consolation,—she would be a mother soon, and then her life would be worth

living. She would have a little one dependent on her, a young life to nurse and cherish and to mould according to her will. Her child would be all she had dreamed her husband was, do all she could not do herself. Oh, the baby would be the beginning of a new chapter in life,—the baby would make her busy, useful, happy!

But now the prospect of being a mother had become full of shame. What should she tell the little one of its father? How should she bear that it should know that he had left her for another? Her child could not honour her when its own father had put dishonour upon her. Besides it would not be *her* child only: it would be his, it would be like him. It would make her love it, and then in a little while it would go away from her, and she would be twice desolate.

She remembered the Sisters of Charity

who lived in the back street and worked among the poor. She thought she would go to them. She was free now, and could give all her life to work like theirs.

But then she bethought her that her unbelief would be a bar against her. They would not admit one who did not worship God. Maurice had shut that door against her also. And again she asked herself for what purpose he had so ruined all her life. Oh, why had he made her love him so !

At last tears came to her relief, and she sobbed upon the bed like a child. How long she did not know, but when the sobs subsided she was too exhausted to think any more, and she too fell asleep.

The sun was high in the sky when she awoke, and sounds of life both within and without the house told her that it was late. She sat up in bed and tried to recall the incidents and feelings of the

night. She was not much more capable of reasoning about them than she had been while they were actually passing, for her head ached cruelly, and she had that sense of being mentally bruised and strained that always follows upon a great and new trouble.

But there is a wisdom belonging to the morning that is as independent of reasoning as is the delirium of the night. And inevitably, her daylight thoughts took a more probable direction than those she had had in the darkness. She ran over in her mind the things that were to be done during the coming day, and in doing so the mere force of habit compelled her to count upon her husband's presence in the house.

She looked at her watch and found that it was half-past ten. 'I wonder whether Maurice has gone out yet,' she

thought; and she got up and knocked at the door of his dressing-room.

There was no answer, so she went in.

The room was empty, but everything about it looked as usual. The clothes he had worn on the evening before were lying on a chair; letters evidently brought by that morning's post were on the dressing-table; a little paper of memoranda was sticking in the glass, and she noticed that one or two additions to it had been freshly made. He would not have done that if he had meant to go away altogether. She went back to her room and rang the bell: she had courage now to face the housemaid and ask questions.

The maid brought her a note from Maurice. He had gone to his office at the usual hour and had left this note to be delivered to her on waking, not before. Laura tore it open eagerly. It was very short, and the tone of it was neither more

nor less affectionate than usual. It merely told her that he had looked in at her last night and this morning, but that finding her asleep both times he had thought it best to leave her undisturbed. He would be in at five, and he hoped to find her better. She must send for him immediately if she was not.

Being thus relieved from her worst fears, she asked about Cassandra and received the message that had been invented for her. Then before she was dressed, Sarah came to see her and stayed with her for the rest of the morning, and in the afternoon Rachel called to take her for a drive. She went with her gladly, only stipulating that she must be brought home before five, as Maurice had said he should be in early and she did not want to be out when he came. Rachel promised, but miscalculated the time, and they were

still in the Park when five o'clock struck.

Cinderella at the ball after midnight cannot have been more distressed than Laura was at the discovery. She implored to be driven home at once, and afforded her sister a good deal of amusement by the nervous restlessness that possessed her till she was finally set down on her own doorstep. Rachel had driven away before Laura learned that her alarm had been unnecessary,—her husband had not yet come in. At first she was glad, as she had set her heart on being at home to receive him; but when an hour went by and still he did not come, she began to grow uneasy. And when another hour passed without his appearing, all the worst fears of the night before came back to her. It was true that he was sometimes detained by business till late at night, but then he

always sent her a note or telegram—and to-night neither came. The notion of his having gone away with Cassandra reasserted itself, and Cassandra's mysterious disappearance in the morning seemed to give it fresh probability. No letter had come from her either, and her message was that she would write in the course of the day.

The cook sent up to ask whether she would wait dinner: it was more than half-an-hour after the usual time, the food was spoiling. Laura said she would wait a little longer. Another half-hour passed, and the housemaid came to persuade her to dine alone. Laura would have refused, but it struck her that the girl looked at her compassionately as if she suspected that something was wrong, and she thought she would best disarm suspicion by doing the most reasonable thing. She went down and dined by

herself, forcing herself to eat as a means of persuading her household that all was right.

Then she went up to the drawing-room and sat doing nothing. Ten o'clock struck, eleven: he had not come. She rang the bell and sent the servants to bed. A little later she went up herself and undressed. He was clearly not coming home at all. She would try to go to sleep. She bethought herself of some sleeping-draughts that she had been using lately. She took one, but it had no effect on her. She could not stay in her room. She put on a dressing-gown and wandered about the house,—in and out of the rooms, up and down stairs, like a poor ghost that revisits scenes of past happiness, and finds them desolate.

She went into the dining-room and drew back the curtains and looked out into the gas-lit street, hoping to see her

husband coming. Long time she looked, but there was no sign of him. She went through the folding doors into the back-room which he used as a study. It had been shut up all day, and the atmosphere of it was close and oppressive. She set her candle down on the writing-table and opened the window, letting in a strong gust of air. It caught some papers and sent them fluttering about the floor. She knelt down to pick them up, but the attitude brought on faintness, the room turned dim and the furniture swam around her. She scrambled to her feet and felt her way back to the other room, where there was a sofa on which she could throw herself. The faintness passed quickly; but, in the passive state that followed it, the composing draught took effect, and almost immediately she was asleep.

Asleep and in heaven. She was sitting

again in the cedar grove at Ardgwen. Sunshine was creeping lovingly about her, blue sky looking in through the dark branches overhead. There was a sound of crackling among the dead leaves, and she knew that he was coming. The sunshine grew brighter and brighter, and she saw him standing before her. She tried to stretch out her arms, but they were heavy and she could not lift them. She tried to speak, but her lips were numbed.

Suddenly the spell was broken.

‘Laura,’ said his own voice, but not in the low tender tone in which she had thought to hear it. It rang round her like a shriek of horror, and she started from the sofa with an answering cry of ‘Maurice!’

A great glare of light was about her, the room seemed full of people. But she saw nothing clearly but her husband

standing over her with arms stretched out as if to save her from some deadly peril.

She sank upon his breast, and darkness closed round her in a swoon like death.



CHAPTER VII.

‘Look in my face : my name is Might-Have-Been.’

CASSANDRA found it difficult to wait patiently for indirect news of Chester Place. Moreover such news as came was incomplete. Rhoos's second note told her that Laura was not up when he called, and though he transmitted her message that she was much better, Cassandra felt no confidence in the information. A third note that came in the evening was equally unsatisfactory. He had tried to see Laura again in the course of the afternoon, but had not found her at home. However he had heard from Rachel that

she had been driving with her and was pretty well. He promised to come to Wimpole Street next morning.

But the morning passed without his appearing, and no note came to explain his failure. Cassandra grew uneasy and made up her mind to go to Arlington Street for news. She had hardly gone a hundred yards before she met Rhoos.

‘I had given you up,’ she said.

‘I was unavoidably hindered,’ he answered. ‘But will you not come back with me now?’

Cassandra turned, and they walked home together.

‘Something has happened,’ she said; ‘let me hear it at once.’

But he said, ‘It will be better to wait till we are in the house;’ and she submitted.

He talked of indifferent things, and she answered at random. Then, as soon

as they were in her room, she put an end to the forced conversation by saying peremptorily,—

‘Now tell me. I see it is something dreadful. But it cannot be worse to hear it than to be in this suspense. How is Laura?’

Rhoos thankfully availed himself of the invitation to be direct. He said,—

‘Laura is very ill. I ought to tell you at once that she is in serious danger.’

Cassandra had turned deadly white.

‘Go on,’ she said. ‘Maurice?’

She could not frame her question, but Rhoos followed her thought and answered it:—

‘He is with her, he will not leave her—she does not know him now, but when she recovers’

‘But she will not recover!’ cried Cassandra. ‘She will die, and I shall have killed her.’

Rhoos made no answer. He knew it would be useless to argue that point with her.

‘Go on,’ she said. ‘What has happened? How is she ill? For mercy’s sake tell me everything at once.’

He told her the story of the day before,—how Maurice had gone out in the morning leaving Laura asleep and meaning to come home early,—how he had been unexpectedly detained at the office, and then just as he was hurrying home had been recalled by his chief, who wanted him imperatively to go down to the House of Commons.

‘He wrote to Laura, but there seems to have been some mistake on the part of the messenger, and she never got the letter. Laura, it appears, was wild with anxiety all day. The servants say that from the time she came in from driving with Sarah till bedtime she did nothing

but wander about the house looking like a ghost. But at about eleven she went to bed, and then they thought she would be all right, and went to bed themselves. However she seems to have got up again and come downstairs to watch for her husband;—though exactly what she did nobody can tell, as she is quite delirious, and it all happened after the servants were gone to bed.'

'What happened? I do not understand,' said Cassandra. Suddenly one definite idea possessed her. 'She has not tried to kill herself?'

'No, no. I fear I am telling the story bunglingly,' said Rhoos. 'It was not that. But when Maurice came home, he was startled to see a policeman standing on the doorstep ringing the bell violently. He hurried up, and as he passed the dining-room window he saw that the room was on fire. He opened

the door and rushed in to find Laura asleep on the sofa. She started up, screamed with terror, threw herself into his arms, and fainted. Her child was born in the night.'

'Is it alive?'

'No, dead.'

'She had been looking forward to it day and night,' said Cassandra, 'and I have killed it.'

Rhoos said nothing.

'And Laura, you say, is dying,' she said.

'No, I do not say dying, only in very serious danger.'

Neither of them spoke for some minutes. Cassandra's feelings were too mixed to find relief in expression, and Rhoos divined that any words of consolation would be vain.

After a little pause he said,—

'I had a favour to ask of you.'

Cassandra started. There was one favour she lived in daily dread of his asking of her—one she could never grant, and yet which she knew not how she could refuse after accepting so much kindness from him. But her alarm was needless this time. He went on,—

‘We want you, if you have no other plan, to go down as soon as possible to Ardgwen. My mother has been telegraphed for, and we expect her in the course of a few hours. But my father cannot be left alone, and if you would go to him it would be a great comfort to us all. Mary has offered to go, and I have done my best to discourage the idea. I think you would be a more comfortable companion at this moment. He will be terribly cut up. Anything that touches Laura, you know——’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Cassandra, ‘and it is all my fault.’

‘Do not exaggerate that idea. What has happened is connected with your fault. But Laura has been in a morbid state for a long time, Rachel tells me. It might all have come about even though you had stayed at Nant-y-Gwyn.’

‘It is my fault,’ she repeated.

‘About going to Ardgwen,’ said Rhooos, who was determined to keep conversation to the safe point of practical action. ‘About going to Ardgwen. If it would not be very inconvenient to you, it would be a great kindness to go. You are the fittest person in every way. And now that, of course, the reading must be given up, we thought you could not have anything to keep you in London. But if for any reason you dislike the plan, pray say so, and we will arrange something else.’

Cassandra did not answer. She was looking absently away, hearing what he

said without attending to it. He said again,—

‘Pray do not hesitate to say if the plan is disagreeable to you.’

And she recalled herself with an effort.

‘I beg your pardon, I really don’t quite know what it was you proposed, I was thinking of Laura. May I go to her?’

‘That is impossible; she is in raving delirium. No one but the nurse and Maurice are allowed in the room, and he is only there on condition of not speaking to her.’

‘What was it that you proposed that I should do?’

Rhoos told her over again, and she consented to go. He went out at once to telegraph to Mrs. Gwynne that she was coming, and then returned to settle details with her. He undertook all necessary arrangements for her, and

promised to send Sarah to see her before she went.

As she wished him good-bye her voice faltered and she said,—

‘I wish you would not be so kind to me. I can never repay you, and it makes me miserable to know it.’

‘You need not fear me,’ he answered. ‘If ever I ask anything of you that is not wholly in your own interest it will not be in the name of benefits conferred. I hoped you knew me better than to think I would urge such a rotten title as that.’

‘I have nothing to give,’ said Cassandra; ‘one title is as good as another. I can only thank you.’

‘You would probably not do even that if you knew what it is that you really owe me. I have a debt to you which I am trying to pay.’

She felt bewildered, but did not press for an explanation. When it came later

from another quarter, it moved her very little. It belonged to her fate that those who loved her best should make her wretched.

For days Laura lay between life and death. And every post carried to Ardgwen the news that there was no news. She was still delirious, the doctors still refused to speak of hope. Every day added to the danger of the reaction that was inevitable as soon as the fever should subside ; every day Cassandra came home with a heavier heart from her walk to Cresford in search of the afternoon letters ; every day she found it a harder task so to soften the truth to Lord St. Asaph as to keep him from starting for London.

The spectacle of his sorrow was a torturing reproach to her. Anxiety for Laura had made him for the first time in his life forget to be anxious about him-

self, at the same time that it made him really ill and unfit for the journey he wanted to undertake. During the past year his health had grown rapidly worse; his mind was failing, and real physical ailments had been added to imaginary ones. The shock of hearing that Laura was dangerously ill had brought on a sort of fit from which he did not rally. Cassandra was shocked at his condition when she came down. He seemed to have grown twenty years older, the blow had brought him to his dotage. And this too was her doing.

She was a very gentle nurse to him, and he was grateful to her, and every word of gratitude was a new reproach. He talked of Laura continually, comparing her with her sisters, and saying how inestimably superior she was to them all.

‘She was the only one who was gentle,’ he used to say, ‘the only one who had

any tenderness. She used to understand that I was ill and to be patient with me. She belonged to my family; the others are like their mother. Come here.'

And he led Cassandra to look at the picture of the other Lady Laura.

'Did it ever strike you how like she was to that?' he asked. 'That girl died two hundred years ago because her people were not tender to her. And they hid away her picture in a lumber room, and it stayed there till I found it the other day and had it hung here. It was at the time your father was ill, and I and my wife came over in a hurry from Florence and had to stay on several months. It was then that she was born, and I called her Laura after the picture.'

He held the light up to the canvas, and they both looked at the portrait. The likeness to Laura had never struck Cassandra so forcibly before: it was the

Laura of those last few weeks in London, the wreck that she was answerable for.

She thought of what might have been and what was, and she turned away to look at the other pictures in the room,—at Lady St. Asaph's splendour of strong youth, at the genius in the countenance of her husband, at the innocent prettiness of the little Laura in the coral necklace. The same story seemed written on them all,—unfulfilled promise, baffled purpose, great aims with pitiable results. Wealth, beauty, genius, love—all the gifts life covets, lavished in mockery instead of blessing.

Lord St. Asaph was still looking at the portrait of his ancestress.

‘She died young too,’ he said.

‘At seventeen,’ said Cassandra. ‘Laura is almost twenty.’

‘Is she? I always think of her as a child. It seems but yesterday that she

was born. She was the only one who was born here. The others were all born in London, except Egmont, and he was born at Florence. But she belonged to the place. I suppose it was foolish of me, but I fancied she would always stay here. She was fond of the place and never wanted to go away, and everybody was fond of her,—that was the worst of it. I suppose if I had not given her to Maurice Herne, some one else would have taken her. I wonder whether he has been kind to her. I don't know, but I sometimes doubt it. She did not look well when she was here at Whitsuntide. She had a pinched look like the girl in the picture. It used to haunt me. If she gets well I shall have her back and keep her—she can't go away any more. I hate having my children out of my sight. People are careless. . . . Besides I can do nothing without her.

I have not written a line that is good for anything since she went. I must have her back if she gets well. But there is no chance of her getting well—no chance of it. Nine days of delirium, the prostration will be terrible, she can never rally from it. *I know what prostration is.*

‘Yes, but you have rallied from it. People make wonderful recoveries, especially young people.’

‘But she is not strong; she has inherited my constitution, she is like me altogether. I wish I knew whether that fellow has been kind to her. Why don’t you say what you think of him, Cassandra? You know him well—he is your cousin or something of that sort. But women never say what they think, except my wife. I don’t think she trusted him altogether. But Rhoads was set upon it. He urged it on and persuaded

me it was for the best. I was too yielding. That has been my fault all my life. And Rhoos is overbearing, he is more like his mother than me. I wonder why he was so set on this marriage.'

'Let me sing to you,' said Cassandra; and she led him back to the drawing-room, and went to the piano and sang him one song after another till he complained that the noise tired him. Then she came and sat by his couch again, and listened patiently to his complainings till bed-time.

The days passed monotonously. Every morning after breakfast she went over to the rectory and stayed with her mother till twelve, the time at which Lord St. Asaph left his room. Then she went to him, and read to him as long as he would listen. After that she walked with him round the garden if it was fine, or sang to him if the weather kept them in-doors. At four o'clock regularly she started on

her walk to Cresford to fetch the letter that would tell about Laura; and the evening went in listening to such rambling talk as I have described. It was weary work, but she was thankful that it had been given to her to do.

At last news came of a change in Laura's condition. The fever had subsided: she was conscious again, but utterly prostrate. The next forty-eight hours would decide. Next came a telegram telling of increased prostration. Rhoads inquired whether it would be quite impossible for Lord St. Asaph to come to town. Laura was fully conscious and had asked for him.

But nothing was said about Cassandra, and she felt that the worst punishment was coming upon her. Laura was dying, fully conscious and without relenting towards her.

Lord St. Asaph read the great agony in

her face and thought his child was dead. He burst into tears and asked if it was so. She showed him the telegram, and he insisted that he was well enough to go.

She had not the heart to oppose him, —she knew what it was to love Laura and not be allowed to go to her.

She took upon herself the responsibility of his going, and sent a note to her mother enclosing the telegram and saying that she was making arrangements for her uncle to travel to London that night. She must go with him of course, and there was too much to be done for it to be possible for her to come to the rectory before starting. Would her mother come to her?

Her father came too, and said he would go instead of her. But before it was time to start another telegram came and told them the danger was past. A favourable turn had taken place almost

immediately after the despatch of the first telegram, and now with care and patience they might count on all going well. Cassandra rang the bell violently and then ran out herself to stop the carriage.

Later in the evening she said suddenly to her mother,—

‘ If she had died I should have been a murderess. It was all my fault. Did you know it ? ’

‘ I guessed, my child,’ said the mother, and she kissed her. That was all that ever passed between them on the subject.

Immediate, threatening danger was past, but for weeks the house in Chester Place lay under the shadow of the most serious anxiety. The slightest cold might produce a relapse, the slightest relapse could hardly fail to be fatal. But unremitting care and a healthy constitution brought Laura safely through all

risks, and before the end of September Lady St. Asaph was allowed to bring her down to Ardgwen.

A few days before they came, Cassandra was relieved from her charge of Lord St. Asaph by the arrival of Lady Mary, who would have come long before but for Rhoo's ingenuity. He knew that Ardgwen could not hold her and Cassandra at the same time, and he was determined that Cassandra should not be ousted. Accordingly he persuaded his sister that her presence in London was indispensable so long as Laura's state continued critical. Their mother, who had been indefatigable in nursing, to an extent that was telling on her own strength, might knock up at any moment, Sarah was wanted at Llanoun, and Rachel, though she had stayed in London expressly on Laura's account, allowing her husband to drink the waters

of Vichy in solitude, was too flighty to be depended upon in case of emergency.

Lady Mary was open to flattery that addressed itself to her superior sense, and she forebore from disturbing Cassandra by personal invasion of the castle. She contented herself with writing her long letters of instruction in the art of entertaining her charge, which Cassandra answered as shortly as she could, and practically disregarded.

Cassandra was reluctant to leave Lord St. Asaph to the tender mercies of his daughter, but she recognised the necessity of being gone before Laura came, and she was grateful to Rhoss for the considerate care with which he had provided for the contingency.

On leaving the castle she spent a few days at the rectory, and then returned to Wimpole Street to resume her lectures to young girls, and prepare for a course

of dramatic readings to be given in the winter season, for she was fully resolved to go on with the life of independence she had planned.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘So but thou strive, thou soon shalt see
Defeat itself is victory.’

WITH the return of spring Laura was pronounced fairly recovered, and Lord and Lady St. Asaph had to resign themselves to letting her go back to London. Maurice was impatient to take her home, and she was eager to go, though as the time of departure drew near she felt more sad than glad.

She was loth to leave Ardgwen and all the home tenderness that it held for her; she wondered sometimes whether she had not been to blame in leaving parents

who wanted her so much, and whether perhaps the sorrows of the past year had not come in punishment of her selfishness. But such considerations she knew were useless. Her duty was now toward her husband, as also her strongest affection. She had no doubt of that and no wish that it were otherwise, only she grieved, as we all do sometimes, that the dispensation that was happiest for herself had its drawback on the side of others.

The months of her convalescence had been for her a sweet and solemn holiday-time, in which, by dint of passive brooding rather than active reasoning, she had arrived at truer conceptions of her married life than she had been able to shape for herself before. She could see now clearly that of those sins of omission which had undermined her reverence for her husband she was herself directly or indirectly the

cause. In serving Mammon rather than God he was sacrificing to the prejudices of her friends, and while she kept silence he might naturally believe that the sacrifice was acceptable to her. If he had been weak in this matter it was with a weakness born of his love for her. And his relations with Cassandra—the other rock on which her happiness had risked wrecking—she had learned also to regard in a truer light. The promised explanation had never yet been made, and she was content to forego it altogether. All that she cared to know was that her husband still loved her tenderly and loyally, and of this she had assurance stronger than any that mere words could give.

She might still doubt of many things, but she had no doubt left as to her husband's love. She rather doubted whether there were any purposes or principles in

life the neglect or pursuit of which could fairly be weighed against the possession of his love. It seemed to her that henceforth it would suffice her, and that she would not again be tempted to repine because her sphere of usefulness was smaller than she had thought to find it. It would console her for the disappointment of the hope she had nursed through the last summer. It would be enough for her even if that hope were never to be revived.

She did not want any explanation about Cassandra, but she longed daily for a reconciliation with her. All bitter thoughts of her had passed away—in her own contentment, they turned to pity for her who never could be so content. For gradually the story of Cassandra's love and hope and disappointment had become clear to her; all the confused indications of the past, Cassandra's dark hints, her

own complicated misconceptions, chance words and looks of others, and all the incidents of the summer, had fallen into their right places, so that she could read them in connected narrative. She understood, and pitied, and forgave, and resolved that almost the first thing she would do on returning to London would be to seek her cousin and be reconciled with her. In the meanwhile she had no difficulty in keeping herself informed as to her doings, for they were much talked of both at the rectory and castle ; and, at first, with strong disapprobation from every one except Lord St. Asaph, whose old predilection for Cassandra had been much strengthened by the sweetness with which she had borne with him during her six weeks' charge. He never failed to take her part when things were said or looked against her, and so by degrees Lady St. Asaph ceased to frown at men-

tion of her name, and Lady Mary learned to be silent. Then, by-and-by, came reports of her brilliant successes. She was the star of the winter season, and—nothing succeeding like success—opinion began to veer round in her favour. Her father, who had been bitter against her plan of an independent life supported by class-teaching, grew proud of her as she rose in favour with the fashionable world. He took to himself the credit of her gifts, and was gracious when people congratulated him on her triumphs.

Anna alone was consistent in disapproving. She could not understand, she said, why it was more noble and philanthropic to make money by being the fashion in London than to stay quietly among one's own people and do the duty that belonged to one. She made the observation one day to Laura, but Laura did

not answer. It was in her mind that Cassandra did not probably derive much enjoyment from her success.

Though Laura was well-informed as to Cassandra's movements, Cassandra was in ignorance of Laura's, for the family at the rectory were bad correspondents. Mrs. Gwynne's fluency of talk deserted her the moment she took pen in hand, and her letters were affectionate and frequent without giving much information. Mr. Gwynne prided himself on being too busy a man to write on any but business occasions. And Anna, though she conscientiously sent her sister a fortnightly budget, had a knack of omitting to mention the things Cassandra was dying to hear. Once, four weeks passed without a word being said about Laura's health, though the last news of her had been that the east winds of the early spring had occasioned

a relapse into weakness. Cassandra wrote repeatedly, 'How is Laura?' and when at last the question was answered it was with apparent unconsciousness that there had been long silence as to the special cause of anxiety. Intelligence came more regularly for a time, then it stopped again and Cassandra grew uneasy. She could not bring herself to press her sister any more; it was too obvious that her neglect was intentional.

She knew moreover that there was a stern righteousness about Anna which would have made her write in spite of herself had there been anything of vital importance to tell, and she tried to persuade herself that no news was good news and that her anxiety was groundless. But she could not reason away her uneasiness, and at last, one evening, she made up her mind to go to Chester

Place and inquire at the house. She was surprised, on approaching it, to see open shutters and other signs of occupation. Evidently they had returned to London, and it would not do for her to call, as Laura might misunderstand her purpose.

She was turning away, when a carriage stopped at the door and a lady handed out cards to a maidservant whom Cassandra quickly perceived to be a stranger. It struck her that this being the case she might call without being recognised, and before the girl had time to leave the door she came up and made her inquiries.

‘Has Lady Laura Herne come back to town?’

‘Yes, ma’am, she returned last Friday week.’

‘Is she better?’

‘Yes, ma’am, thank you. Her ladyship is doing nicely now. She generally sees people in the afternoon, but to-day

she is lying down and I was to say she could not see visitors.'

'I did not expect to see her,' said Cassandra ; and she lingered a moment on the doorstep in vague desire to get some information, but unable to think of questions that might elicit it.

'Would you like to leave a message, ma'am ?'

'No, thank you ; I had nothing special to say. I am glad Lady Laura is better. Good afternoon.'

And Cassandra went away leaving the new maid rather puzzled as to the strange lady who would leave neither card nor message, who did not expect to see anybody, and yet seemed so disinclined to go.

The door of Laura's bedroom was ajar, and as she lay on her sofa in a luxurious dreamland, half-way between sleeping and waking, she overheard the dialogue

that was passing at the door, and recognised Cassandra's voice.

She rose from the sofa and rang the bell.

The maid brought with her the cards of the lady who had called at the same moment with Cassandra.

Laura glanced at them.

‘Had any one else been?’

The maid described Cassandra's visit of inquiry.

‘I know who it was,’ said Laura. ‘I would have seen *her*, but you could not guess it. Will you send for a cab for me at once? I must go out this afternoon.’

Laura began to dress herself while she spoke, and the maid wondered what had possessed her mistress. She had complained of languor half-an-hour ago, and had said she must not be disturbed all the afternoon. But there was no languor

about her now : there was a flush on her cheek and a clear light in her eye, and all her movements were prompt and energetic. She was in the hall, bonneted and cloaked, before the cab was at the door. She was so impatient to be gone that she forgot to leave word when she was likely to come in, and she had to turn back from the end of the street to say that she might perhaps be late, but that it would be of no consequence, as her husband was not coming in to dinner.

Cassandra had not returned to Wimpole Street by the time Laura got there, and the servant of the house could not say how long she might stay out. Laura said she would wait for her, and she was shown into the sitting-room.

She took off her cloak and bonnet and sat down to wait. She had come to take up their friendship on its old terms, and Cassandra should find her waiting in the

old intimate way in which she had often waited in her bedroom at Nant-y-Gwyn.

She pictured to herself Cassandra's return, the surprise with which she would discover her, the mutual joy with which they would rush together. She saw the breach quite healed, life blamelessly happy again.

She was so impatient for Cassandra's return that she could not sit still. She wandered about the room, looking at the books and papers, and putting things straight. The ordering of detail was not among Cassandra's gifts, and her room looked less comfortable than it used to do in the days when Laura was frequently in and out of it. Laura thought she must take it in hand again.

In the course of her tidying she came upon the little book Cassandra had once lent her. She stood still before it in sudden awe.

It seemed to her the symbol of Cassandra's pain. She remembered the letter with which she had sent it back, and thought how cruelly its easy gladness must have wounded her to whom it came as the knell of gladness. She took it reverently in her hand and opened it.

The green stains were still on the fly-leaf, but the inscription they had blurred was carefully erased. Laura remembered that it had been the passage from *Faust* in which Cassandra had triumphed in her reading,—the aspiration to sound the heights and depths of life, and exhaust the experience of humanity. Below it—instead of it—was written another motto, also from Goethe. Prose, in place of poetry :—

'If now during our own lifetime we see that performed by others to which we ourselves felt an earlier call, but had been obliged to give up; then the beauti-

ful feeling enters the mind that only mankind together is the true man, and that the individual can only be joyous and happy when he has the courage to feel himself in the whole.'

Laura laid the book down with a sense of having been rebuked. She had assumed too lightly that she could make all things straight again. Personal happiness was assured to herself. But for Cassandra all that was possible was to learn to live without it.

The door opened and Cassandra stood before her.

They did not rush to one another as Laura had thought they would. Cassandra drew a step back and stood silent. Laura came timidly forward and said,—

‘I have come to see you, Cassie. I want you.’

Cassandra kissed her coldly and asked her to sit down.

She had been thinking of Laura, night and day, with shame and yearning love ; she had longed to throw herself at her feet and ask her forgiveness. But now that Laura stood bodily before her, the springs of her repentance seemed dried up. She felt herself the victim of an imposture. The Laura towards whom she had repented was the Laura of the haggard eyes and wounded heart,—the wife she had supplanted, the mother she had robbed of a desired child, the suffering woman whose pain she had occasioned.

But of all this there was no trace in Laura as she stood now in her presence. She looked well and happy, better than Cassandra had ever seen her look before. For excitement gave colour and animation to her appearance, and her pretty summer dress set off her beauty in bright contrast to the dingy lodging-

room. She looked so bright and radiant that it seemed to Cassandra that she had come to triumph over her, and that when she said, 'I want you,' she meant, 'I want you to come back and look on at my triumph;' and her heart hardened against her. Laura was happy: there was no longer need to think of her with penitence. She was good, and the wrong done could not hurt her. It was she, Cassandra, who had to bear the suffering as she must bear the blame. She would bear it then, but she would not show weakness in the presence of those who had nothing to bear.

Laura repented that she had come. But she had not presence of mind to go at once. She sat down as she was bidden, and tried to talk of nothings. She asked about Cassandra's doings, and Cassandra answered that she was very busy. Besides the classes she had under-

taken last year, she was now giving private lessons, and she had a great many engagements for evening readings. She talked like a successful woman who had nothing left to desire, and Laura was taken in.

After a few minutes of such talk she rose to go, and Cassandra did not gainsay her. She helped her to dress and wished her good-bye as coldly as she had received her. Laura had difficulty in repressing her tears as she went to the door.

But before she had passed the threshold, she heard Cassandra say, 'Laura!' and she turned back.

Cassandra was sitting by the table with her head bowed down, and her face buried in her hands. She did not look up as Laura turned, and Laura thought she must have been mistaken in fancying herself recalled, and moved once more towards the door.

‘Laura, do not go,’ said Cassandra, and she looked up beseechingly.

Laura came back to the table.

‘I will stay if you wish it. I thought you did not want me. You——’

‘I know, but stay. I had so much to say to you, but when you came, I Oh, Laura, forgive me!’

Laura put her arms round Cassandra’s neck and kissed her.

‘Laura,’ Cassandra said presently, ‘I have been wanting to see you, hoping every day that you would come, for I knew that it was like you to come. I wanted to ask your forgiveness—to tell you everything. But when you came, a demon seemed to possess me, and I could not speak.’

‘There is no need to speak,’ said Laura.

‘You have forgiven me,’ continued Cassandra. ‘I know that, or you would not have come.’

Laura answered with a silent caress.

Cassandra went on,—

‘I did wrong and I brought sorrow upon you. But your sorrow has passed, and joy and peace have come back to you. With me it is different ; peace can never come back to me.’

‘Hush, dearest. Do not say that ; it will come back. You meant no wrong. Peace will come back to you.’

Cassandra shook her head.

‘No, the world is ordered otherwise. Peace is for those who have never done wrong—never even known it. My peace died long ago when I was almost a child, and if I wanted to make excuses it is that that I should plead. My peace was taken away, and I had to live without it.’

‘But it will come back,’ Laura repeated.

‘Never,’ said Cassandra. ‘Shall I tell you what my life has been lately ? I have

gone on with my work, because they told me it was right to do so—and I have been successful. People have paid me compliments, and I have enjoyed them for a few hours and then come home here to despair and misery.—Is that peace?’

Laura did not answer. She was taking to heart the hardest lesson of life, that there are griefs past cure, lives broken beyond our mending.

‘You see there is no peace for me. All that is left to me now is repentance and work. But I do not mean to go on with this life I am leading now. It has become hateful to me. People look askance at me as a woman and run after me as a lion. I have made up my mind that it shall end with this season. I have told Rhos so; it was he who said I must not stop at once.’

‘And what will you do instead?’
Laura asked.

‘To begin with, I mean to be a hospital nurse.’

Laura felt inclined to cry. That the brilliant Cassandra should end by being a hospital nurse seemed the most impotent of all conclusions.

‘But is not that a very hard and dreary life? Surely you might do something else. With your talents, Cassandra. . .?’

‘My talents have not brought me much happiness,’ Cassandra answered sadly. ‘I am beginning to lose faith in them. I want work of which I can never doubt the usefulness, and the life I choose now will give me that. Besides I am fond of nursing. The happiest hours of my life have been those in which I was doing work of the kind I am thinking of falling back upon now.’

‘But then you had other things to fill up your life. As a hospital nurse you

will have nothing but nursing, and you will not even be your own mistress.'

'I am tired of being my own mistress,' said Cassandra drearily.

Laura said no more.

Presently Cassandra spoke again:—

'I once thought I might do something, but I had not courage, and I was not honest, and I waited, always thinking that something might happen to take me away into a more congenial world where I could be straightforward and simple. But it does not do to pin one's hope on things outside oneself. I always knew it. I remember used to be fond of saying so. That is the thing that puzzles me most in all this. I have done everything contrary to my principles—to my nature almost. But it is over now. . . . Only, Laura, there was one thing more that I wanted to say to you. You see I am like a person who is dying. You

must let me talk on, because I am going out of the world and shall not have another chance. I wanted to say to you that, though I have brought you so much trouble, I loved you all the time. It happened partly because I could not give you up—at least I think so. Yes, I always loved you, and you used to love me, I think.'

'Why do you say *used*, Cassie? Should I be here now if I did not love you still?'

'You love me—yes—but it is a different kind of love from what you used to feel for me. You cannot help it, but it is different. You pity me now, you used to look up to me,—at least I thought so, but perhaps that was a delusion like everything else.'

'Cassandra,' said Laura, 'you must not talk like this. I did look up to you, and I do still. I owe you all that is best

in myself. I owe you what I can never pay. Why will you talk to me as if I were a child and could not understand your wretchedness? I think I know just how it was with you. You were alone and you felt too weak to do all you had dreamed of doing, and you thought help was coming, and then it failed you and you despaired.'

'Laura,' said Cassandra, 'you do not know how I bless you.'

'And you do not know how I love you,' said Laura. 'You must not doubt it again. You must come and see me soon—often.'

Cassandra smiled sadly at the innocent suggestion. Not all the wisdom of life is revealed to the babes and sucklings—there are some points in which the world-experienced can instruct them still.

'I shall never come to you any more,' she said.

Laura felt that her decision was final, and they were both silent for a time, during which Cassandra walked impatiently up and down the room, while Laura sat still, wondering at the strange series of events that had brought their friendship to this end.

Suddenly Cassandra stood still, and began to speak in a different tone from that in which she had talked of herself and begged forgiveness. Her voice was low, but there was a tone of authority in it, and there was a look like inspiration in her eyes.

‘Laura,’ she said; ‘I have hidden nothing from you. I have confessed to you that I am utterly wretched—painful as it must be to you to know it. I have told it to you because you are the only person to whom I can speak and be understood, and because in my wretchedness I have grown so selfish that I must wring

a little comfort for myself even at the cost of another's pain. And I do not repent of having spoken. Your joy has been bought at the cost of my misery. My misery has overflowed into your life and embittered it with what may be a lasting pain. You know it and you have forgiven me. You have accepted the pain as your share—a sister's share—in my lot. You do not wish to go free from sorrow while others are weighed down by it. You would not, if you could, blot out of your memory what has passed between us to-day. You would not go home deluded with the thought that by a few kind words given out of the abundance of your blessedness you had made me happy when in truth I am not happy. Tell me that you would not.'

There was a fierce solemnity in her voice which Laura caught in her reply,—

'I swear to you that I would not.'

‘I believe you,’ said Cassandra, ‘I do believe you. I feel sure that you will never be content in a fool’s paradise of personal happiness, that you will never harbour the hateful lie that all is well with the world because all is well with you. When your own cup of happiness is fullest you will remember that every drop of it has been refined in the heart’s agony of another. You will take every joy that comes to you as a new debt to your fellow-creatures. You do feel this, Laura?’

‘I do. I have felt it vaguely for a long time. I feel it now as a law I must obey.’

‘Yes, that is right; it is a law and you must obey it.—Oh, Laura, you have spoken of my talents. Let me speak of them for a moment now that all temptation to glory in them is gone for ever. I never undervalued myself,—none but a fool does that. I knew that I was beauti-

ful and had genius, that I could sing as few artists can, that I could speak so as to move people, that I could think like a man and feel like a woman. I knew that I had great gifts, and I gloried in them—I dreamed that I could do much with them, and that in using them I could find all I wanted in life. I thought I could do without happiness and be content in making others happy. But I could not.'

Here her voice sank to a whisper. She laid her hand on Laura's hand, and Laura felt the touch thrill her as though some power independent of words was being brought to bear upon her.

'Laura,' she went on, 'that is the thing I most wanted to say to you. *People can't do without happiness.* To be unhappy is to be maimed, diseased, stunted,—to have one's heart soured, one's judgment perverted, one's whole

life turned into temptation. People *must* be happy. And it is *your* duty to make them so; for you are happy. Yes, you are very happy. The best happiness is yours—such as alone makes men and women whole and sound and able to help others in the highest. This happiness is yours—is it not?’

‘I think so—I believe so.’

‘I *know* it is so. And it is a gift beyond all others. You spoke of *my* gifts, Laura. They are nothing by the side of yours. Mine are the gifts that make it possible to serve; yours is the gift of royalty that lifts you above the wants and the dependence of the many and enables you to bless and save as a god.’

‘But, Cassandra, it is not true—it cannot be true, that only the happy can help others and make them happy. You helped me!’

‘I helped you—yes. But it was not I who made you happy. I helped Maurice, but it was not I who made him happy.’

Laura was silent.

Cassandra went on,—

‘You cannot contradict me. You know that I am right.’

‘You frighten me. What you say is terrible. It is despair for all but a very few.’

‘It must not be so much longer,’ said Cassandra. ‘But it will be so for ever if people shrink from facing the truth. You asked me once to tell you about my faith, and I avoided your questions. I might have told you much about systems of philosophy—about organisation of society—about science and art and industry. But I would not. These things are necessary and, in their measure, good. But they are imperfect

and transient. They pass away or change. They can never fill our hearts or be to us instead of God. They are not a faith—they cannot be built up into a religion. But there is a religion for us as well as for our fathers,—a Religion of Humanity that will use and control these things in the future, as the Religion of God used and controlled them in the past. It is much simpler than any system, and at the same time much harder, for like the religions of the past it is made up of devotion and self-sacrifice—of prayer and dependence on the one side, of mercy and help on the other. We have dared to say that man must no longer look to God for help. We must not stop there. We must go on to say—All that man once asked of God, he must ask henceforth of his fellow; all that man believed God to be in the past, he must himself

be in the future. That is the new covenant. We must be gods on earth, or we shall be eternally condemned for having hinted that there is no God in heaven.'

'But we are so weak. It sounds like blasphemy to talk of being gods.'

'We are weak for ourselves, but we may be strong for others if we have courage to be true and open. Oh, Laura, the law that runs through our lives is greater than ourselves, and our part is but to make it more clear to others by our faithful recognition of it. This we can do, whether we succeed or fail.' She paused a moment and then began again, 'I have failed. I thought to do much. I was ambitious. I dreamed that a day would come when I should move the world widely. But I was not happy. I was alone, and a woman can do nothing alone. You know how my hopes are

wrecked and how my life breaks off here in blank failure.'

'No,' cried Laura, 'I know nothing of the kind. You are still young and all your gifts remain to you.'

Cassandra waved her hand impatiently.

'Do not torture me with suggesting what is impossible. I know that I am still young in one sense. I have probably forty years or more left to live, and there is abundant power of work in me. But I have lost faith in myself; and without that, one cannot do the best work. I have fallen very low in my own eyes, and all the strength that is left to me I shall need to lift myself up again. I have none with which to help others. All I have to give is my failure and my misery, and these I give to you that they may be a perpetual reminder to you of the failures and the miseries of all the world. You have taken my treasure

—you must take my debts with it and pay them faithfully all your days.’

‘Cassandra,’ said Laura in a low terrified voice, ‘what can I do? You say a woman who is alone can do nothing; a married woman can do less. She is bound to another, she has no will left.’

‘It is not true,’ said Cassandra, ‘not true in your case. You have influence over Maurice, but you have not courage to use it. He worshipped you when he married you. He loves you now. You will be to blame if you do not use his love to benefit the world. Tell him your heart as you have often told it to me. Let him know that your faith is your life as his faith once was his life, and you will not find him wanting. Oh, Laura, forgive me, but it was your own fault in part that things went wrong. He did not like to take you too literally at your word and make you sacrifice

everything to his gods; you never told him that they had become your gods too.'

'I have told him now,' said Laura.

'Yes, and you are one again.'

'But we are no nearer devotion than we were before.'

'You do not know,' answered Cassandra, with a characteristic transition from enthusiasm to common-sense. 'You are only just out of bed. A man cannot be blamed for not revolutionising his whole life while his wife is lying at the point of death. Go on being frank; tell Maurice to-night all that I have said to you.'

Laura looked doubtful.

'Yes, tell him,' repeated Cassandra. 'You need not fear me. I am a spent ball that has grazed your life in passing and now lies dead and harmless. You need not fear me.'

Cassandra turned away and walked to-

wards the window. She stood looking out upon the street, dreamy and silent.

Laura felt that she was waiting for her to speak, that she expected her to give some pledge of sincerity and earnestness, some promise of devotion in the future. But she knew not what to promise. Since her illness she had ceased to trouble herself about the problems that had so painfully occupied her before. Her diminished strength seemed, for the present at any rate, to have settled the question of whether she should embark upon any work of outside usefulness. Whatever might have been her duty before, it was clear that now she was not fit to undertake work, and that her home life was more than enough for her. And, without quite acknowledging it to herself, she rejoiced in this solution by circumstance of the difficulty she had

been unable to solve for herself. She felt that a burden had been lifted from her life, and she shrank from any suggestion that she ought to take it up again.

It seemed to her that this was what Cassandra was asking her to do, and she would not answer all at once.

After a pause, she said,—

‘What is it that you think I ought to do? You speak as if you knew what was the best work, as if you had made up your mind and everything was clear to you. But I cannot make up my mind as to what is right. And the more I think of these things, the more puzzled I grow. Do not despise me, but I grow so puzzled and so tired that I sometimes think it is better not to think at all, but just to take life as it comes, and live from day to day. But I daresay I am wrong. Tell me what you think one ought to do.’

‘What one ought to do?’ echoed Cassandra wearily, and without turning from the window. ‘What one ought to do? How can I say? It is impossible to chalk out a life for another, almost impossible for oneself. I once believed in there being a special work calling to each one of us. But now I doubt it, except for the very few.’

‘And for the few, what is the best work for them?’

‘The work their inspiration calls them to. There is no one work that is best for all, of that I am very sure. But I am sure also, at least I think I am, that if any of us feel a special work calling to us again and again, so that, though we may turn from it time after time, we cannot find rest outside it or be happy while it is undone—I think then there can be no doubt that that is the work to which we ought to give

ourselves. Such haunting seems to me an inspiration as true as that which drives the painter to paint or the poet to sing. I think that to doubt it is faithlessness, to accept any other life is failure. Does it not seem so to you ? ’

‘ While you say it, it does, but not at other times.’

Laura waited a moment, and then, with a great effort, went on.

‘ Cassandra,’ she said, ‘ I cannot help it. I am not as great as you think I am. I have no inspiration. No great work calls me. I once thought it did, but I know now that I was mistaken. I am not great, I can do nothing. If I promised, I should disappoint you. Let me go, or I *shall* promise and be unfaithful after all. Cassandra, I *must* go. I am not what you think I am. Let me say good-bye and go.’

Cassandra started and took Laura’s

hands, which were stretched out in farewell.

‘Forgive me,’ she said; ‘I was not thinking of you, but of myself. It is to me that I think a special work calls. It is I who must devote myself as I have always dreamed of doing, or accept failure for my whole life. I was thinking of myself, not of you. For you, I think you are right—no special work calls you.’

‘I am not great enough for it,’ said Laura humbly. ‘I must be happy. I am selfish: I know it. And weak: I cannot help it. Let me go, Cassandra, I cannot bear that you should despise me.’

But Cassandra did not let her go. She held her hands, and looked into her eyes wistfully and appealingly.

‘There is no fear of my despising you,’ she said. ‘You misunderstand me. You

think I want you to do some great special work, and that you are not great enough for it; whereas special work is just what I think you are not called upon to do. Not because it is too great for you, or you are too little for it, but because for you a normal life is possible, and a normal life is always best. There is nothing unusual in your character, or your circumstances, no extraordinary endowment or maiming defect, such as throws people out of the usual beats of life. You have been happy all your life, with the exception of this one year,—happy in your own character, in your affections, in your circumstances. And you are going to be happy again.'

'And being happy, you said I could help most. How?'

'In this way. All are not equally happy; all cannot be equally happy. But there is a sort of communism pos-

sible in happiness. The unhappy have a claim upon the happy; the happy have a debt towards the unhappy.'

'But how can one share one's happiness with others? It seems to me impossible. It is what I have most wished to do, but I see no way in which it can be done.'

'In one sense certainly you cannot share your happiness, and you cannot give it away. It is essentially your own, a development of your being, a part of yourself that you may not alienate. To give it up would be a barren sacrifice, a mistake of fanaticism that would better no one. And yet there have been those who, feeling strongly the inequalities of life, have been driven by an enthusiasm of sympathy to renounce the happiness they could not share with their fellows.'

'I have sometimes thought they were right.'

‘I know. It is a phase one passes through. But it is a mistake, and one you are not likely to fall into again. You are more likely to fall into the opposite error, more likely to end as many who began as you began, with quick sympathies and a passionate desire to help, have ended. You are more likely to be tempted by-and-by to think that after all there is not so much misery in the world as you once thought there was, or that people might all be happy if they would—to believe in what people call a law of compensation by which things are made even all round. It would be a very comfortable law to believe in, but unfortunately it is one that does not exist. People invent it to justify themselves in being selfishly content when they have got all they want for themselves. And this is what you must never do. You must regard

your happiness as a trust for others, which you cannot alienate and may not dishonour. You must keep your happiness pure, because only thus can it be an ideal helpful to others, only thus can it rouse sympathy in those who are striving to realise an ideal for themselves. The moment you allow it to be corrupted by selfishness or worldliness, it will cease to be ideal, and instead of sympathy it will provoke envy, and so add bitterness to the lot of those who are less favoured. Oh, do you not see what a mockery it is for those who are striving to be pure and unworldly in the midst of privations and disappointments when those who are happy use their happiness for base and worldly ends—how paralysing it is to those who are labouring to help others to better ideals, when those who have the ideal in their grasp degrade it or deny it? Do you

not understand how it tempts to scepticism and despair, and how the opposite helps and inspires ? ’

‘ I do,’ said Laura in a whisper.

‘ And now you understand what I mean when I say that you have a great trust to which you must be faithful. Oh, Laura, there was a day lately while I was at the castle, when your father took me into the library and made me look at the picture that we all think like you. It was at the time when you were most ill and we thought you would not recover. He held a candle up to the face in the canvas and made me notice how like you it was, in look and expression, and then he told me the story of his finding it hidden away in disgrace, and of his bringing it out and hanging it among the modern portraits. He said this was at the time of your birth, and then he talked of you as his favourite

child. Then he went back to the girl in the picture, and said she had died young. And I knew he was thinking that you would be like her in your fate as you were like her in look. And I felt it too, though I tried to turn from the thought. And I looked away at the other pictures in the room—at your mother's portrait and your father's. And I thought of all the promise of their youth and of the little that had come of it. And I thought of my own girlhood and of my powers, and of Maurice and of our old friendship, and of you, and how I had helped you as a girl, and how we had loved one another. It seemed to me that everything had been wasted, and that the end of all our loving and aspiring was to be failure and disappointment; and I said to myself that it was always so—that disappointment was everywhere, and that to purpose greatly

was but to prepare the greater failure. And then you got better, and by-and-by I knew that you were quite happy, and then I believed again. I said to myself that one happy life atones for many that are disappointed,—nay, that it is the law of life that many strive and suffer and fail, in working out the happiness of a few, and I thought I could be content in thinking of you as one of the few who are chosen for blessing. I thought I could be content even if I never saw you again and never had assurance of your forgiveness. I thought I could, but I could not. I have told you how wretched I have been. Formerly, I remember, I used to cling to life in spite of sorrow, but lately I have longed for death. I was ill, and once I thought I should die. And then it came over me that I could not die without first seeing you. It seemed to me that I had a right

to claim from you the sympathy and forgiveness that I knew I should have given if I had been in your place and you in mine. I wrote to you——’

‘I never had your letter.’

‘I did not send it, and I am glad I did not. You have come without my summons, and so I know that you are here because you too feel the law of love, and are not afraid to trust it. Your coming is like a promise to me. It tells me that you will be faithful in your happiness to all that you learned when you were unhappy, that you believe in the covenant of human sympathy which will be the consolation of the generations of the future.’

Her voice had grown hoarse with much speaking. She paused a moment to recover it, and then said solemnly,—

‘Tell me that I am not wrong. Promise me that you and Maurice will be faithful.’

‘Yes, yes, we will be faithful,’ said Laura in a whisper.

‘And you will be happy. Laura, you *must* be happy, or I shall feel that I have suffered in vain and that my life is wholly wasted.’

She ceased speaking, and there was silence in the room.

A great awe was upon them both, and the deepening twilight intensified the vision Cassandra’s eloquence had called up.

In the small, dim room there was nothing to remind them of the judgments of the world, and the street sounds, coming up in an inarticulate rumble, seemed rather a monotonous accompaniment to thought than an interrupting voice. It was one of those rare moments of existence when the clamour of temporal things is silenced and the voice of the spirit becomes intense like the whisper

of rustling leaves to the lonely ear that listens in the forest. For Cassandra it was a moment reaching far back into happier years, rich with kindred enthusiasm, of which the memory came to her like a draught of renewed life. She felt strong once more, she believed in herself, she did not doubt any longer that she would be true to the end—steadfast in renunciation—unremitting in atonement.

For Laura it was a moment reaching forward into years of fruitful work—into ages, remote, unthinkable, that should be bettered by the faithful service of lives now dedicated. She saw as in a vision the generations of the future submitting their lives in reasonable obedience to the immutable laws that make right right, and wrong wrong—trusting the impulse of affection and sacrificing self to the interest of others

—finding gladness and peace in the fulfilment of the new covenant of human sympathy. The cynical might doubt of joy, the selfish might scoff at love, but she would never heed them. She would believe the vision, she would trust its teaching. She recalled the evening when she knelt by her bedside and trembled at the awful dignity involved in the love that crowned and throned her. She felt that that hour and this were linked to one another as the first day and the second of her life; and she bowed down her head and prayed that the days to come might not fall below their level.

And then she went home and found her husband watching for her on the doorstep.

‘I have been with Cassandra,’ she said, and they went in together and she told him what had passed.



CHAPTER IX.

‘I do not wish to be moved, but, growing where I was growing,
There more truly to grow, to live where as yet I had languished.’

NOT many days after the interview with Laura, Cassandra received another visit. She had come in from giving a lesson and was sitting disconsolately in her room, a prey to sad memories. She had tried to read, but her mind refused to follow the page, and she threw down the book and gave herself up to brooding.

She was not sorry to have her thoughts interrupted by the entrance of the maid with a card, but she started on seeing that it was Rhooos’s. His last letter had

been written from Vienna, and he had said nothing of coming to England. She wondered, too, why he had sent his card before him instead of coming straight in as was his wont. That he should do so seemed to give a formal character to the visit, which made her uneasy.

But, of course, she must see him. She told the servant to bring him up, and then, before he could come in, she surveyed herself in the glass and made a great effort to drive away from her face all traces of weariness and depression, for never in her life had the instinct to show a brave front to the world been stronger in her than at that moment. Her effort was successful, and, when her visitor entered, she looked bright and strong as her old self, and her greeting was given with a self-possessed courtesy that suggested anything but embarrassment.

‘It is very kind of you to come and see me,’ she said.

Rhoos had not expected to find her so calm, and his face betrayed surprise. There had been indications, in her late letters to him, of a disgust with her way of life and an eagerness to break from it which had made him uneasy on her account. He had imagined her out of hope, depressed, in danger of doing foolish things; and he had come over with designs based on these imaginings. He had thought, moreover, that she would probably suspect his designs as soon as she heard that he was there. But her calm manner seemed inconsistent with such suspicion. Before answering, however, he looked at her again and thought he detected a slight quiver of the lips that belied the quiet of her manner. Accordingly he refused to take her greeting words as mere conventional

form, but treated them as a mistaken statement which it was important to contradict.

‘No,’ he said, ‘it is not kind of me to come to see you. I have come on my own business.’

Cassandra could play her part of unconcern no longer. Rhoos’s second glance had found her out, and she was at the end of her resources of dissimulation. She waited in helpless silence for his next word.

He seemed in no hurry to speak. He established himself in his favourite position on the hearth-rug, surveyed the room critically, looked once more at Cassandra, and at last after a pause of some minutes said deliberately,—

‘Cassandra, do you remember a conversation we had ten years ago in the rectory garden when I asked you a question and you gave me an answer?’

‘Such questions and answers,’ said Cassandra, ‘are not among the things that people forget.’

‘No, they are not. I hear your answer now as distinctly as I heard it then. It was a very cruel answer, hard in substance and scornful in tone,—such an answer as a man certainly does not forget.’

Cassandra was silent. A scene from the past had risen before her, a vision of a glistening sun-bright hour at the end of a day of continuous rain, when Rhoos had come to look for her in the rectory garden, and had found her working in a bed of lilies ankle-deep in mud. He had asked her to be his wife, and she had told him scornfully that it could not be.

‘A man does not easily forget such words,’ Rhoos said again. ‘You told me that, if you married me, you would despise yourself and despise me. You taunted me with idleness and self-indul-

gence and worldliness and a great many other faults. That was a long time ago.'

'Ten years,' said Cassandra.

'And in ten years people change.'

'Not much.'

'They learn.'

'Not much.'

'But still something. For instance, I have learned that most of the things you said were perfectly true and are true still. Then you have learned something.'

'I have learned that I am incapable of learning,' she said bitterly. 'I am no better, no nobler, no wiser than I was at twenty. And if I am changed at all, it is in this, that every day my nature grows more passionate and ungovernable. I know I ought to be changed. I have made a great mistake, and I ought to be humble and to say that all my old way of looking at things was wrong. But I can-

not. I am the same woman that I was before. I shall never be different.'

'Who wishes you to be a different woman, Cassandra? Not I surely. I never heard that when Jacob had served seven years for Rachel, he was glad to be put off with Leah. I think he wanted Rachel.' Rhoss was silent for a moment; then he said,—

'Cassandra, I have come to ask again the same question that I asked ten years ago. Have you only the same answer for me?'

'The same in substance,' she said, 'but not the same in tone.'

'You mean that you say now as then that you cannot be my wife?'

'Yes, I say now as then that I cannot love you as a wife should love her husband.'

She spoke firmly though very gently, and he felt a sentence in her words against which there was no appeal. He had not

much hope of moving her, but he could not give her up without another effort.

‘You are not scornful now. Will you not tell me what it is that makes it so impossible? I have loved you constantly all these years. I do not say that I have never admired any other woman or that my life has been blameless. I do not pretend to any special heights of virtue, but I do say that I have never seen a woman whom I have thought worthy to hold a candle to you, and that if you send me away, Egmont’s wife will be the next Lady St. Asaph. I shall never marry another woman. Is it nothing to you, Cassandra, that a man should care for you for ten years, and come back to you——’

She finished his sentence for him.

‘And come back to me when my folly has humbled me to the dust? No, it is not nothing to me—it is so much that I

should like to thank you for it on my knees. But . . . oh, Rhooos ! you have been so good to me, and yet what you ask is impossible. I cannot do it.'

He walked twice up and down the room, then he said,—

'Perhaps I have made a mistake—I have come too soon. I should have waited till you were happier, more yourself. Will you forget that I have been to-day and let me come again ?'

'It would be useless,' she said with desperate determination. 'You say you could not marry another woman ; judge of me by yourself and forgive me. It is not my fault or yours that I cannot love you. It is our fate—my fate which has decreed that for me to love or to be loved shall be only an occasion of misery to myself and others.'

'I will say no more,' he answered; and for a few moments they were silent.

Then he asked her what she was thinking of doing.

‘I mean to be a hospital nurse,’ she said.

They were the very same words in which she had answered Laura when she asked the same question. But she uttered them less confidently this time. She knew that to Rhoss they would sound like a declaration of madness, and it is difficult to speak with confidence when one knows one will be heard with amazement.

He drew a long breath.

‘Good heavens, Cassandra! Have you taken anybody’s advice in making this decision?’

‘I have thought a great deal about it. It is a useful life.’

‘Possibly, but not a life fit for you. Have you formed any conception of the dreariness of it?’

‘It cannot be drearier than my present life.’

‘That I believe, but I never expected you to go on long with your present life. It was necessary for a time, but now you might give it up without making a sensation,—you might go home.’

‘Impossible! I would go if I were wanted, but I am not wanted. There is no place for me at home. The life I am choosing will suit me very well—for a time at any rate.’

‘I do not believe it. You are making a tremendous mistake. You were made for society. You are social, emotional, brilliant. You are not the sort of woman who can turn herself into a machine and live without affections.’

‘I hope not,’ said Cassandra, smiling for the first time during the interview.

‘Don’t tell me you are going to have affection for these hospital people,’ he

said; 'I don't believe in that sort of thing.'

'Yes, you do,' said Cassandra. 'I have learned that during my ten years.'

'H'm Have you told your own people of this plan?'

'I shall tell my mother as soon as it is quite settled. In the meanwhile I have told Laura.'

'You have seen Laura then?'

'She came two days ago. We are friends.'

'I am glad of that. Then I need not bother you any more. I feared you might be friendless, and I wanted to say that, if ever there was anything I could do for you, you were to send for me, and I would come from anywhere. You know I never have anything to do that is of the smallest consequence to me or anybody else. And when a woman takes her life into her own hands, she does sometimes need a

man's help. You will be doing me a kindness by letting me serve you, and you need have no fear of my ever renewing to-day's subject. Will you promise that, if ever you need help that I can give, you will ask me for it?'

'I promise thankfully,' she said with a faltering voice and tears in her eyes. And then she gave him her hand and they parted.

As soon as she was alone Cassandra sank upon her knees and, burying her face in her hands, sobbed long and uncontrollably.

Many emotions were mingled in her tears,—pity for the wound she had inflicted, pity for herself that she had been compelled to inflict it, and bitter passionate regret for all the sweet and pleasant things of life that had become impossible to her. Shame and regret and self-reproach,—vain yearnings after the impossible, weak shrinkings from the

inevitable. But no repentance from her purpose ; for the past had taught her that the same world could not hold her and Laura's husband without danger to them both, which she was resolved never to risk again.

She knelt on, and by degrees she grew more calm. All her life passed before her in review. Her turbulent childhood, her exiled girlhood, her starved womanhood. Her isolation of soul, the hopeless love to which she had passionately clung. Her brief career in London, her temptation, her struggle, her failure. She reviewed it all calmly, and asked herself where she had gone wrong, at what point she had taken the false turn, what moment and what act should bear the burden of the blame. She reviewed the whole dispassionately, and acquitted and condemned the whole ;—acquitted herself of wrong intentions, condemned

the faults that made her life a failure. She looked her life frankly in the face and said, 'I could not do other in the past, but I will do other in the future. I have striven and failed; but in striving I have measured my strength, in failing I have learned my weakness. I have failed, but I have been sincere, and those who know me best believe in me still and trust me. Laura came back and Rhoads came back. Oh, if *he* would come too! Then I should know that, for him too, the conflict was past and rest assured. If he would but come!'

She knelt on, and the wish grew every moment more intense. If he would come, peace and joy would return, for she would know that in his life and Laura's she had a place of sympathy and safety. She might never see them again, but she would be with them evermore in spirit. She would have a right to think of

them and live towards them, and thus and thus only she felt that it was possible for her to live. If he would but come! The wish grew to a prayer—she felt that she must kneel on till it was granted.

She heard the door open behind her. She turned towards it. He was there! She rose and came towards him.

‘Maurice,’ she said, ‘did you know that I was praying that you would come?’

‘Then you are not angry with me for being here?’

She did not answer, but she looked up and gave him both her hands, and her eyes smiled.

‘You have grown thin and pale,’ he said, ‘and it is my fault. You are ill.’

‘No, I am happy.’ And she smiled again.

‘You smile as I have fancied dead people might smile,’ he said.

‘I smile as people smile when they are

happy—when the bitterness of death is past, and they meet their loved ones at the judgment-seat, and are not ashamed.—Maurice !’

‘Cassandra !’

‘What was it that you came to say ? I want to hear it.’

‘I came to ask your forgiveness—to say again, what can never be said strongly enough, that I have been weak and unworthy—that I have made you suffer.’

‘Do not say it, dear.’

‘But it must be said, or how can I take your forgiveness ? How can I ask you to believe in me again some day ?’

‘I do believe in you. I have always believed in you.’

‘I have not done much to deserve that you should.’

‘No, that is true,’ she said. ‘You have done very little, almost nothing. You see I do not flatter you, I am not

a blind believer. I know that you have done nothing, and I am not afraid to say it.'

'I thank you for saying it. I have done nothing, and I have made you suffer.'

'I did not say that.'

'But it is true.'

'You must not say it again. You have come to help me. I want to tell you about my plans and to know whether you think them mad. Rhoads said they were, and so did Laura almost. You won't say so, will you?'

'You are going to be a hospital nurse?'

'For a time.'

'And afterwards?'

'I don't know. I don't think I am in a fit state now to make plans for my whole life. But I think after a year or so in a hospital I shall be myself again, and then—— But I am not going to

make plans for afterwards. Tell me that it is not unreasonable to leave the future to shape itself. You used to say so. Do you still think it ? ’

‘ Cassandra, I did not come to advise you. Of what use can my opinion be to you ? I persuaded you once against your judgment, and trouble came of it. Do not tempt me to advise you again.’

‘ But it is not advice I want, it is confirmation, and no one can give me that but you. Maurice, do you remember how when first we knew one another I used to try to make you more ambitious ? —I wanted you to do great things and make yourself a name. Do you remember how you used to make me angry by saying that I worshipped nothing but success, and I used to call you the apostle of failure ? And once I challenged you to paint a life without success that should be deservedly called great, and you said,

“To have an ideal that all the world thinks mad except oneself, to pursue it by paths that all the world thinks wrong except oneself, to fail in reaching it through some weakness of one’s own character, to fail ignominiously and publicly and be hooted at by all the world, and to believe in one’s ideal more firmly after failure than before.” Do you remember?’

‘I do. And I remember that we never argued about success and failure again.’

‘True, because you had convinced me. I understood that you were only wanting in ambition because your ideal was something outside of yourself. And from that day I believed in you. Tell me that you still think as you thought then.’

‘I still think as I thought then, Cassandra. But when one has made a great mistake and brought trouble on others, it is not the moment for speaking with confidence.’

‘No ; but I have forced you to speak.

You see I have failed, and my ideal is unchanged. When I come out of the hospital I want to try to do all that I dreamed of doing before. You will not say that I am mad if I do ?’

‘Certainly not. To believe more firmly after failure is great, not mad.’

‘Maurice, we have stumbled together. We have failed together. We tried to do what was beyond our strength. We were wrong to fail, but we were right to try it.’

‘I think we were.’

‘It is the same with regard to your career. You have done nothing brilliant. You are nowhere in the race. You have not succeeded in making your life what you meant it to be. So far you have justified the world’s judgment of you. People will presume upon this. They will pester you with advice. They will say, with more confidence than ever, all the things they said of you before. They

will urge you to change the whole manner of your life. They will want you to give up everything that interferes with getting on in the world,—to drop philanthropies that absorb time and money, to draw in your sympathies and narrow your intellect,—to grow hard and concentrated and selfish. But they will be wrong. Ambition can never be a stimulating passion with you, for it is not in your nature. You could only develop a narrow greed that would cramp your energies and paralyse your will more fatally even than the hesitation of the past. Your true inspiration lies in sympathy. Your mistake has been that you have trusted it, not too much, but too little. You must not listen to the world, Maurice. You will not, will you? You will be great and believe more firmly after failure than before?—Do I seem to you to be talking nonsense?’

‘You are speaking the truth. You are saying what I wanted to say myself, but could not say for shame, for I am bankrupt just now of self-respect, and I cannot make promises and protestations. But if there is any way in which I can serve you in the future, any sacrifice that you think I ought to make, ask it, and, as my life answers, judge of the sincerity of my purpose and of the purity of my feeling towards you!’

She did not reply, and he repeated,—

‘I cannot make promises or protestations. I am ashamed to make them. But if you believe in me—and you say you do—ask something—anything—everything.’

Still she was silent.

‘Is there nothing then? Nothing great or small that I can do and feel as I do it that I am serving you? Is there nothing, Cassandra?’

‘There is everything,’ she said. ‘Oh, Maurice—Maurice—Maurice—you have told me to speak. If I speak wrongly you must bear the blame. You have told me to ask some one thing of you, and I can ask nothing less than everything. My whole life depends on yours, my soul lives by yours. Nothing short of your whole life can satisfy me. You tell me to command you to do something, and I can only say, Be faithful to yourself. Be what you are to me in my thoughts day by day and night by night. Be manly, simple, tender, true, and kind. Be upright and faithful, generous and brave. Be what you are and what I love, and you will repay me a thousandfold for all the pain . . .’

A sob broke her voice and she stopped a moment to recover it. He took her hand and drew her towards him, and she crept close with the shivering movement of a frightened child.

‘ You told me to speak,’ she said, ‘ and I spoke as I felt. I could do nothing else. For, you see, it is the last time. And yet I do not know that you have understood me. And you *must* understand me. I cannot live unless you understand me. I cannot trust myself otherwise. I look to you to save me. You *will* save me, if you will let me say one thing more before we part. Maurice, may I say it, and, when I have said it, will you say Amen, and kiss me, and then go ? ’

He drew her nearer and held her tenderly. ‘ Speak,’ he said, ‘ and I will say Amen. It is you who save me. Why should you fear to speak ? ’

She disengaged her hand from his, and stood a little back. ‘ I am very lonely,’ she said, and her voice was low and tremulous. ‘ Life is difficult, and I am all alone. I cannot find God anywhere

as our fathers and mothers found him. I try to, but it is in vain. It is the same with you. You feel as I do that there is no Father of all to whom all can pray . . . But I must believe in something—I must pray to some one. And, Maurice . . .’ Here her voice faltered so that she could not go on speaking, but after a moment she began again more firmly,—

‘It seems to me that though there is no one God in heaven for all, there is God somewhere for each one of us. Somewhere, in some one soul, the highest is revealed to each of us. And that soul becomes to us a temple for evermore, a shrine at which we kneel, a holy of holies where we meet the Eternal face to face. But the temple may be defiled, the Eternal may leave it, the shrine may be desolate, and then it is death to the soul that worshipped there. Maurice, you are my

temple, my shrine, my holy of holies. Promise me that wherever and whenever we meet, here on earth, or hereafter—if there be a hereafter,—promise me that when we meet and I look into your eyes, I shall see the light burning within, and know that the glory of God has not departed from you. Promise me, Maurice!’

She had gathered courage and conviction as she spoke; with every word her voice had gained strength and energy, and by the end of her appeal it had risen to a tone of authority, so that the words ‘Promise me, Maurice!’ sounded more like a command than an entreaty. But as soon as she had spoken, her confidence forsook her, and with a movement of shame, she turned away and sobbed,—

‘Oh, what have I said? Forgive me I am mad.’

Then for one moment his arms were round her, and she felt his kiss upon her

hair and on her brow. And she slid from his embrace and sank upon the ground and buried her face in her hands.

‘Oh, not for my sake only,’ she said, ‘but for the sake of all who are desolate and tempted, be pure and true and strong! Not for my sake, but for your own for *hers* whom we have wronged, Maurice, answer!’

And he bent over her, and she heard him say ‘Amen.’ And it seemed to her that the blessing of peace had come to her at last, and she whispered,—

‘Go now. It is over. You have promised. You will be faithful to yourself, and I shall not despair.’

Then she heard the door open and close again, and she knew that she was alone.

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